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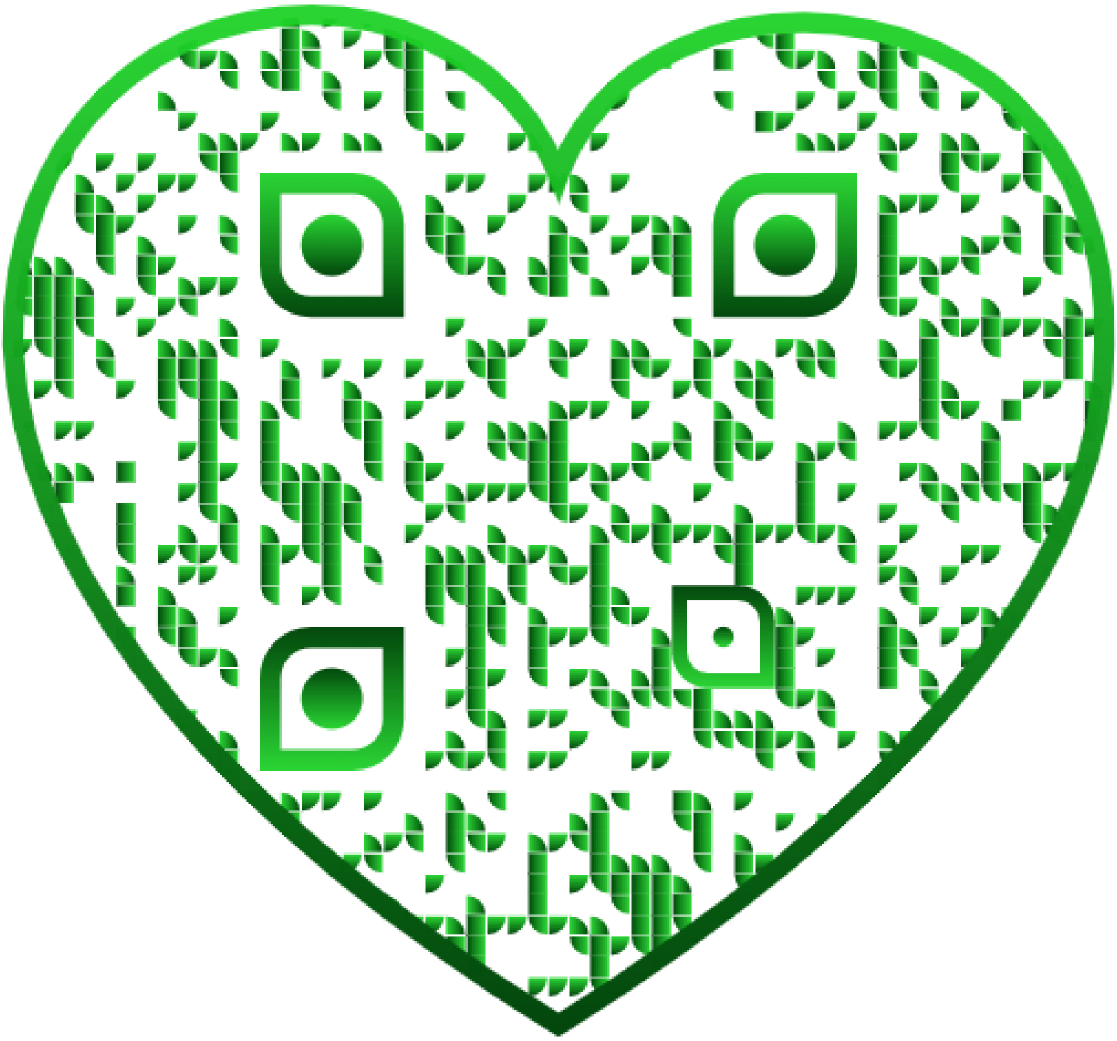

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Editor's Letter

WHEN WAS THE LAST TIME you felt inspired? I mean really, sincerely inspired – when your whole body, from your heart to your fingertips, starts to tingle with excitement, and your mind is awash with a combination of new knowledge, clarity, and a sense of purpose and motivation that makes you feel not only that you can accomplish your dreams, but even expand them into greater ones. For me, it was when I attended TOURISE (p.42) – a first-of-its-kind summit that gathered leaders across government, business, investment, and technology under one roof, to not only discuss, but actually shape the future of tourism. The invite-only event, held in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia in November, was the first time all of these different aspects of the sector had been gathered under a single global platform – and the result was an electrifying three days of launches, announcements, deal-signings, insights, and chances to connect with the best and brightest in travel. By the time I went home, I was positively buzzing from how much I'd learned, and with all of the new ideas and connections sparked through my time there.

MICE (Meetings, Incentives, Conferences, and Exhibitions) has a tendency to do that. Whether it's an intimate gathering, a one-on-one meeting, or a large-scale event, these face-to-face interactions not only accelerate decision-making, share information in new ways, and build trust, they also help to build community. The sense of being part of a unified mission, and the shared identity that can nurture, helps to drive the kind of chemistry and serendipity that can lead to impactful opportunities, stronger cultures, and genuinely innovative progress. It is this very aspect of sharing that underpins the Pullman xChange – a new flagship international event series launched as part of Pullman's global rebrand (p.34), that held its inaugural edition at the Pullman Downtown Dubai last month. Presented as a live forum for creative collision intended to transform the hotel into an experiential cultural platform, I had walked through its entrance – shaped like a portal to another dimension – with a hint of trepidation, as I didn't know at all what to expect. By the time I left, I had made a handful of real connections (and deepened some existing ones), discovered a whole host of fascinating thoughts to mull over, and developed at least five new thrilling ideas around both my work and my personal projects – as well as knowing who I'd like to fulfil them with, and how we might bring it all to life in a way that is both meaningful and sustainable.

In many ways, these benefits mimic some of the joys we can feel when we travel. As Shaikha Al Nowais, the incoming Secretary-General of UN Tourism, put it at the UN Tourism 26th General Assembly – where she was elected to be the first woman in the world and the first-Emirati ever to lead the organisation since it was founded 50 years ago – tourism is the ultimate way to connect people across cultures, create industry growth, and educate and inspire us. As we celebrate the end of a truly transformative year and make our resolutions for the next one, I hope 2026 ushers in another 12 months of travel (p.38), culture (p.31, 32 & 66), progress (p.19 & 28), indulgence (p.46, 48, 53 & 58), well-being (p.18 & 25), and success for us all.

Yi-Hwa Hanna

Yi-Hwa Hanna
Editor

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WORDS **YI-HWA HANNA**

Dispatch

The latest business travel updates

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HOT TICKET

The future of flight

Last month's Dubai Airshow made history with a milestone demo of Joby's flying taxis

WORDS **VICTORIA BEARDWOOD**

ELECTRIC AIR TAXI COMPANY Joby Aviation is taking monumental strides in the race to bring commercial flying taxis to market. On 17 November, it became the first-ever eVTOL (electric vertical take-off and landing) company to give crewed aerial demonstrations at the Dubai Airshow, marking another significant milestone for the emerging industry. This achievement came just days after Joby claimed the title of first electric air taxi company to conduct a point-to-point flight in the UAE. Its inaugural piloted journey in the UAE lasted 17 minutes, flying from its test facility in Margham and landing at Al Maktoum International Airport (DWC). The trip marked an operationally realistic point-to-point demonstration within Dubai's future air taxi network.

→

SUN AND FUN

Surf's up in Dubai!

Grand Hyatt Dubai has unveiled a new boutique waterpark

THE LONG-STANDING HOTEL has opened a brand-new waterpark on its premises: a major new leisure asset to its 37-acre urban resort. The launch of the Grand Hyatt Dubai Waterpark marks a significant addition to the property's 22-year legacy.

Set across 20,000 sqm, the new waterpark features 16 attractions, including a wave lagoon with a sand beach, a lazy river, two slide towers, the Boomerango slide, and the Middle East's first FlowRider Triple surf simulator. Private luxury cabanas with plunge pools and a dedicated family zone are also available. Overlooking the activity zones is La Palma, a new destination restaurant offering skyline views and a family-friendly setting.

"The opening of our new waterpark marks a significant milestone for Grand Hyatt Dubai, as it elevates our leisure offerings and transforms the property into a truly unique destination, where large-scale events, exceptional hospitality and unforgettable leisure experiences seamlessly come together," said Fathi Khogaly, managing director of Grand Hyatt Dubai and area vice president for Hyatt, Dubai. "This remarkable chapter in our journey reflects our continued commitment to innovation and excellence, and we are very proud to unveil the Grand Hyatt Dubai Waterpark – enhancing our guests' experience in new and exciting ways."

During its initial opening phase, access to the waterpark is exclusive to in-house guests on eligible rate plans, with access for day-pass visitors to be introduced later.

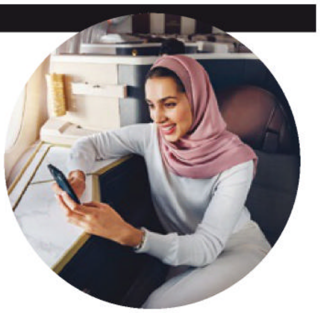
This exciting latest development follows the opening of the property's Exhibition Centre in 2022.

ROUTE ROUND-UP

Emirates and flydubai have become the latest airlines to sign a deal with SpaceX to bring Starlink wifi to the skies. flydubai will introduce the service to all cabins across all of its Boeing 737 aircraft, with installation for 100 planes to take place from next year. Meanwhile, Emirates will be deploying it across its entire fleet within the next two years. It already began installing the technology on its Boeing 777 fleet last month, with its A380 aircraft to follow from February 2026.

Etihad Airways will be majorly expanding its widebody fleet with 32 additional Airbus aircraft. This includes a mix of A350-1000s, A350 freighters and A330-900s (A330neos) through both direct orders and lease commitments, with first deliveries beginning in 2027 – one of the earliest widebody availability windows in the global market. This follows its agreement earlier this year for 28 additional Boeing widebody aircraft, bringing its total new widebody orders for 2025 to 60 across Airbus and Boeing.

Air Astana has been recognised by the International Air Transport Association (IATA) for its contribution to the development of the IATA Integrated Sustainability Program (ISP), which provides airlines with a comprehensive framework to effectively manage and assess sustainability. Air Astana played a pivotal role as one of the pilot organisations supporting IATA in refining the ISP Sustainable Procurement Standards and helping to shape a diverse framework.



Etihad Airways has introduced a series of fully flexible changes to its Etihad Guest loyalty programme that means travellers will now be able to purchase any seat using miles. The airline has also rebranded its GuestSeat product as Saver Award. The new changes see Saver Awards (the rebranded GuestSeat) available across all cabins at those fixed low rates, but flyers can now also book any remaining seat in any cabin with miles if Saver Awards aren't available.

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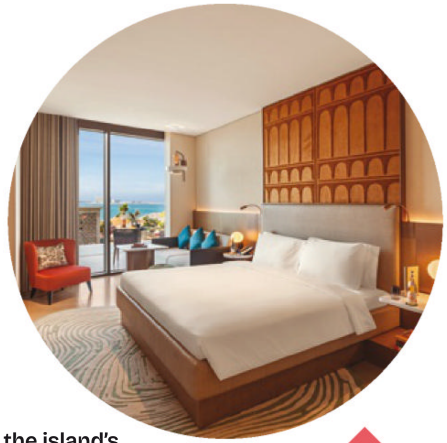
Al Marjan Island gets its first all-inclusive



REST EASY
A guest room at SO/ Ras Al Khaimah

SO/ HAS OPENED a new resort in the UAE's Northern Emirates. Open since 15 November 2025, SO/ Ras Al Khaimah has become the brand's first property on Al Marjan Island, as well as its debut in Ras Al Khaimah. It is also the first all-inclusive resort on the island.

The ten-storey property sits along the Arabian Gulf, around 90 minutes from Dubai, and is positioned as part of a new collection of fashion-inspired, design-focused lifestyle hotels for the region.

SO/ Ras Al Khaimah has 257 rooms and suites, all with sea views, with seven room categories available. Interiors are by Kristina Zanic Consultants. Inspired by a concept-store approach, the design integrates elements of art, fashion, retail, and dining. The palette – sunset orange, ocean blue, and natural green – references the island's surroundings, with materials such as walnut wood, sandstone, and bronze used throughout. Artworks and accessories have been sourced from Curio, a platform representing more than 100 makers and artisans.

The hotel's event facilities can host up to 300 guests. It also has a spa, a gym that offers guests complimentary classes, a range of outdoor activities, and four dining venues.

DINE AND DELIGHT
A restaurant at SO/ Ras Al Khaimah

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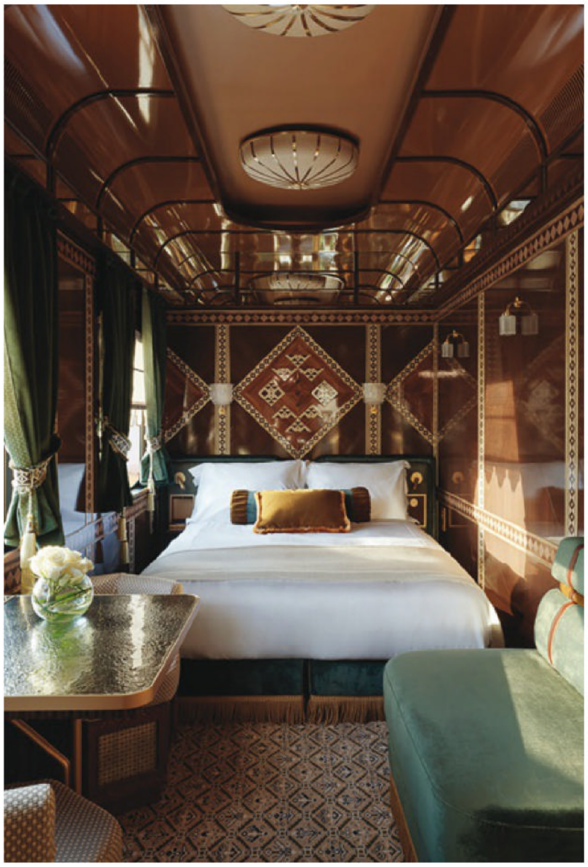
RAIL EXCITING



A dream come true

Arsenale Group has announced the first five itineraries for Dream of the Desert, an Italian-built ultra-luxury train set to begin operations in Saudi Arabia at the end of 2026. Once launched, Dream of the Desert will operate five routes showcasing Saudi Arabia's natural landscapes, heritage sites and cultural destinations, including a three-day trip from Riyadh to Al Jouf, a journey from Riyadh to AlUla, a two-day trip focused on Jubbah with a visit to Diriyah, and Ramadan- and summer-themed trips. Pre-reservations are already available at the official Dream of the Desert website, with nightly rates varying by itinerary and inclusive of meals and curated experiences. The pre-reservation fee is fully redeemable or refundable and offers priority access to future bookings, along with an invitation to the train's inaugural celebration.

WORDS
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Global standards, local heart

The human-focused side of sustainability can sometimes play second fiddle to eco-friendly efforts, but a new hotel in Dubai's Jumeirah Village Triangle is all about this angle. Part of Marriott's Autograph Collection, Hotel Local Dubai, Jumeirah Village Triangle focuses on championing local talent and culture. It has a farm-to-table restaurant, an outlet for home-grown café and bakery Risen, a neighbourhood-centric social hub, and a collaboration with Hatta Honey that has installed rooftop beehives, with the raw honey produced used in the hotel's dining amenities.

A bright win for an Abu Dhabi hotel

IT'S OFFICIAL: As of 6 November, The Ritz-Carlton Abu Dhabi, Grand Canal, was named the host of the largest solar thermodynamic system installed in a hospitality property in the GCC, with a total of 192 panels. The project was installed by Energie. While the GCC-wide claim to this title is likely to change by the time the upcoming Conrad Riyadh Laysen Valley is open — with that property anticipated to have a project with 256 panels — The Ritz-Carlton Abu Dhabi will remain the largest installation within the UAE.

This major milestone reinforces The Ritz-Carlton Abu Dhabi's position as one of the most innovative and responsible properties in the country and region in terms of sustainability. The innovative system helps the property reduce its carbon emissions, enhances its energy efficiency, and optimises its hot water production, reducing its overall energy consumption significantly. Since its installation, the hotel has managed to lower its annual CO2 emissions by more than 100 metric tonnes.

A rising star grows

One of the GCC hospitality realm's most committed sustainability champions is soon heading for Saudi Arabia's second-largest city

IN DUBAI, Atlantis The Royal and Atlantis The Palm are known for their deep commitment to eco-friendly practices — and now, this sustainability star is headed for Saudi Arabia. Kerzner has announced plans to debut its flagship Atlantis and One&Only brands in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, in partnership with Midad Real Estate. The two will form part of the Jeddah Central masterplan, located along the city's Red Sea waterfront. Atlantis Jeddah will include 800 guest rooms and suites along with branded residences. It will feature more than 20 dining venues, including restaurants by celebrity chefs, lounges, and nightlife concepts. The resort will also house the brand's signature Aquaventure Waterpark and Lost Chambers Aquarium, as well as spa and wellness facilities, luxury retail, and event spaces for both leisure and business guests. Both developments will incorporate sustainability principles, pledging to support local communities, establish strategic partnerships, and protect the surrounding land and sea.

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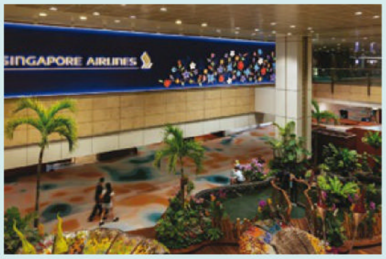
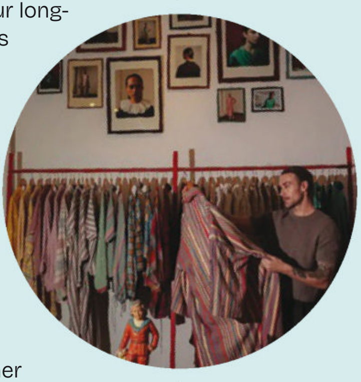


1 Singapore Airlines opens new First Class lounge at Changi

(Above) The newly-renovated lounge at the Singaporean carrier's hub in Changi Airport is part of a S$45 million refurbishment spent on upgrading its three lounges in Terminal 2. The new lounge is near the previous one, in a new 1,050 sqm space featuring abundant natural light and multi-sensory installations including a 3m-high, 20m-long wall displaying the airline's batik motif through 97 laser-cut Plexiglas flowers that come alive in a lighting sequence.

2 Lufthansa reinforces lifestyle positioning with city guides

(Right) The German flag carrier has released a new series of short video guides that profile four long-haul destinations in its route network. The guides underscore the airline's ongoing shift from a traditional carrier to a fully-fledged lifestyle brand. Each video follows the same format, featuring a content creator meeting with a local fashion designer to guide them around their favourite, and often lesser-known, spots in their home city.



3 The EDITION set to open new hotel in Lake Como in 2026

(Left) Officially opening in March 2026, The Lake Como EDITION promises a fresh take on Italian indulgence – where modern minimalism meets celebrity mystique on Europe's most exclusive and picturesque lakeside stage. The hotel, which is EDITION's 21st property, soft-opened this autumn, and reinterprets the interior of a historic building with EDITION's signature design language. It's located in Cadenabbi – a sliver of shoreline as serene as it is chic.

4 Anantara to open luxury safari tented camp in Zambia in 2026

(Below) In 2026, Minor Hotels will unveil Anantara's first safari tented camp: Anantara Kafue River Tented Camp. Poised high above the banks of the Kafue River, one of Zambia's most vital waterways, the luxury camp connects guests directly to Kafue National Park, the country's largest and oldest reserve. With just ten villas and three terrace suites, this hyper-exclusive setting offers guests sweeping views of the river and the surrounding bush. Sliding walls, outdoor showers, and open-air layouts are intended to dissolve the boundary between the indoors and outdoors, while premium finishings and private butlers bring the luxury.

IMAGES SUPPLIED

WORDS
YI-HWA HANNA, ALICE HENDERSON, GEORGE GOMEZ, GARY NOAKES, VICTORIA BEARDWOOD

5 Singapore Airlines introduces world-first green fuel levy

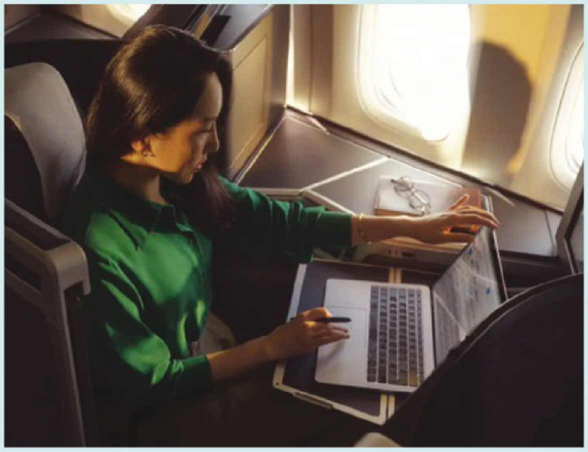
(Right) Singapore is often ahead of the curve when it comes to air travel. It's no surprise, then, that it has become the first country in the world to introduce a Sustainable Aviation Levy, starting next year. Rates will depend on the class of travel and distance flown. The tax will apply on tickets sold from 1 April 2026 for flights departing from 1 October next year, and will affect anyone flying from Singapore. It is designed to fund the amount of SAF needed to meet the 1% target Singapore has set for 2026, and varies on distance travelled. The amount paid depends on four geographical bands covering different regions, with band rates for economy passengers ranging from S$1 to S$10.40. The rates for business and first class will be roughly four times that for the economy cabin for the equivalent geographical band.

6 Six Senses opens wellness-focused urban London hotel

(Above) Following a three-year delay, luxury wellness brand Six Senses has confirmed it will open its first UK property in London in early 2026, marking a new chapter for the group's move into city hotels. The hotel will occupy the restored Whiteley department store, a Grade II-listed building near Hyde Park currently being transformed into a mixed-use development of shops, residences, and hospitality. The project is led by developers Foster + Partners, who are reimagining the 1911 structure with new design by AvroKO for the hotel's interiors. Along with 109 rooms and 14 Six Senses residences, the property will include a bar-cum-restaurant and a spa offering cryotherapy, biohacking and a magnesium plunge pool. It will also house the first-ever Six Senses Place private members' club.

7 British Airways to offer free wifi to all passengers in 2026

(Below) British Airways (BA) has announced a new partnership with Starlink – the satellite internet venture from SpaceX – to provide all passengers with free onboard wifi. The rollout will begin in 2026, marking another milestone in the airline's £7 billion transformation journey designed to elevate the passenger experience across every touchpoint. The new partnership will see Starlink technology fitted across BA's short- and long-haul fleets, promising high-speed, low-lag internet in every cabin. The new system will be a significant step up. At present, BA only offers free wifi to passengers in first class and, even then, on a single device.



8 Virgin to Derail Eurostar's Cross-Channel Monopoly

(Above) Almost 31 years to the day Channel Tunnel passenger services began, a competitor was finally given the green light to challenge Eurostar's monopoly. The victor is Sir Richard Branson's Virgin Group, which will resurrect its Virgin Trains brand, aiming to launch in 2030. Branson has promised to bring the Virgin pizzazz to the rail route and will doubtless use the splendour of the London St Pancras terminal to do so, particularly for business class passengers. Virgin was up against Trenitalia and two start-ups: Evolyn, a UK-Italian consortium and Gemini, a UK company. The UK ORR said Virgin "has the strongest prospects of making the best use of the capacity" at Temple Mills Eurostar maintenance facility at Stratford, East London – the only one that can accommodate the type of trains used to cross the Channel.

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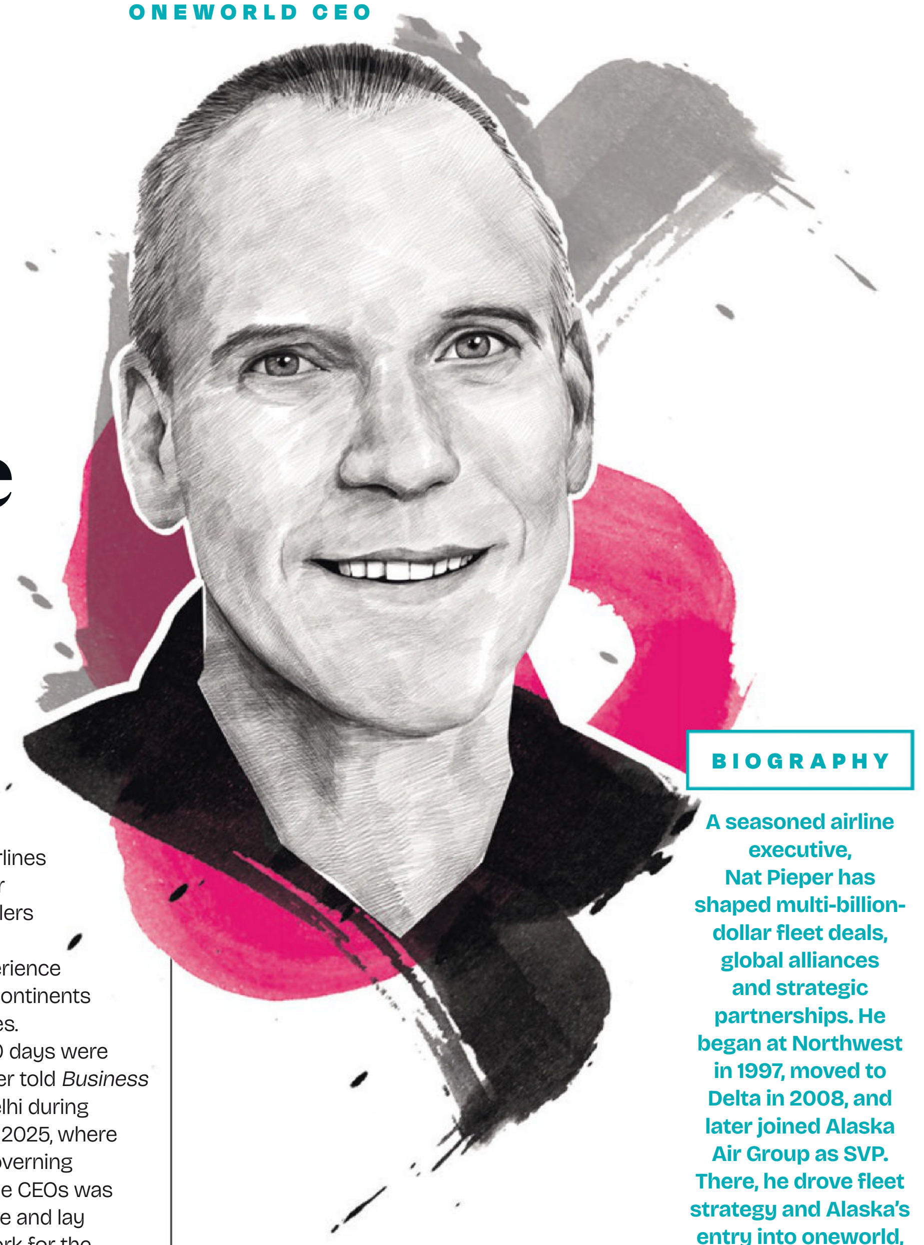
THE BIG INTERVIEW

NAT PIEPER

ONEWORLD CEO

‘My job is to make oneworld feel like one airline globally’

Enrique Perrella finds out how oneworld CEO Nat Pieper facilitates interaction and growth between the alliance’s member airlines



Q & A

WHEN NAT PIEPER stepped into the role of oneworld CEO in 2024, he did so with one clear goal: to steer the world’s smallest global airline alliance into a bold new era defined by premium service, digital sophistication, and collaborative scale. Now, over a year into the role, Pieper is reshaping how the alliance’s 15 member airlines work together to offer travellers a seamless, elevated experience across both continents and time zones.

“My first 60 days were a sprint,” Pieper told *Business Traveller* in Delhi during the IATA AGM 2025, where oneworld’s governing board of airline CEOs was set to convene and lay the groundwork for the upcoming year. “When we met in Dubai last year, I had to present to the CEOs of our 13 members. That was

BIOGRAPHY

A seasoned airline executive, Nat Pieper has shaped multi-billion-dollar fleet deals, global alliances and strategic partnerships. He began at Northwest in 1997, moved to Delta in 2008, and later joined Alaska Air Group as SVP. There, he drove fleet strategy and Alaska’s entry into oneworld, before becoming CEO of the airline alliance last year.

ILLUSTRATIONS **PAUL RYDING**

Continued from overleaf

the moment to define our priorities, and I'm happy to say my badge still worked the next week, so I took that as a good sign." From that first meeting, Pieper quickly identified three strategic imperatives that now anchor the alliance's transformation: customer experience, digital integration, and initiatives of scale.

"We are focusing on delivering a consistent, premium experience for travellers across all our member airlines," says the former airline executive, who has amassed more than two decades of experience in airline management.

Pieper wants passengers – especially the alliance's most loyal – to feel as if they're flying with a single, global airline, regardless of which oneworld carrier they're on. To get there, he reorganised the alliance's structure to reflect how a modern airline operates. "We asked ourselves: What truly adds value for our members? What doesn't? What should be done centrally versus locally?" he says. The outcome was a new vertical structure led by seasoned industry veterans across customer experience, digital, communications and marketing, and corporate services such as finance, HR, and legal.

"This team is built with people who have worked at airlines all over the world. It's not a traditional alliance organisation. It runs like an airline. And our member CEOs have noticed."

New members

Under Pieper's leadership, oneworld has also quietly grown. In April, Fiji Airways became a full member. And Oman Air's addition in June has cemented its role in the Middle East. "With Oman Air coming on board, that brings us to 15 full members. And yes," Pieper jokes, "that means I now have 15 bosses."

Together, these carriers will cover 94% of global air travel destinations. That statistic underscores Pieper's argument that global alliances are no longer about expanding dots on a map but rather delivering genuine value across oneworld's existing network.

Leaning into premium

Oneworld's competitive edge, Pieper argues, lies in its premium DNA. From Qatar Airways and Cathay Pacific to Finnair and JAL, the alliance boasts some of the world's most luxurious and iconic carriers. "Our premium strategy is about more than cabins," Pieper explains. "We're emphasising Emerald benefits, like first class lounge access, which are the most generous in the industry."

In early 2024, oneworld opened its first branded lounges – one in Seoul, and another in Amsterdam – specifically in hubs dominated by rival alliances. "These lounges have exceeded expectations in design and service. They're on par with what our most premium carriers already offer," he says. Up to ten more oneworld lounges are in the pipeline over the next three to five years.

Building the digital alliance

On the digital front, Pieper's ambition is to erase the complexities that travellers experience when switching between airlines. "A year ago, only two members (Qantas and American Airlines) were connected for cabin upgrades. Today, we have seven airlines participating in bilateral agreements," he says, referencing a broader push towards cross-airline upgrade offers through a unified platform. The goal is full participation by all 15 members by the end of 2025.

The result? "You can now check in with Alaska and American Airlines across each other's platforms. Eventually, we'll have universal check-in, bag tracking and cross-airline offers," including upgrade requests, he says. Though some integration phases have taken longer than planned – especially aligning back-end resources across global carriers – Pieper says the programme is on track to be completed by year's end.

> 'It's not about top-down directives. We're fostering knowledge-sharing'

LOUNGE LIFE oneworld lounge, Amsterdam Schiphol Airport

A CEO's role in diplomacy

Unlike his earlier executive roles – he was once treasurer for Alaska Airlines – Pieper's job now involves less number crunching and more diplomacy. "There's no P&L, no aircraft deliveries to manage. Success isn't measured in spreadsheets – it's measured by whether our member CEOs bring their best people and resources to the table," he says. "It's not about top-down directives. We're fostering knowledge-sharing – so our members learn from each other, not just from us."

Being smaller, smarter

With 15 members, oneworld is smaller than Star Alliance (25) or SkyTeam (18), a fact Pieper sees as an advantage. "It's easier to coordinate across 15 than across 25. And we have a strong concentration of premium carriers. That's our differentiator." Ultimately, Pieper sees his role as one of unifier and translator – a neutral actor helping members overcome barriers that no single carrier can solve alone. "My job is to make oneworld feel like one airline globally," he says. "There are still challenges – airport space limitations, aligning commercial policies – but we're making real progress."

Driving this is the alliance's renewed clarity of purpose. With a team built from industry veterans, oneworld is positioning itself not just to survive, but to thrive. "Airlines today don't need an alliance for reach – they already have that," Pieper concludes. "They need an alliance that helps them win. That's what we're building." **BT**

IMAGES **COURTESY OF ONEWORLD**

Progress In Motion

As innovation shifts away from its traditional strongholds, China's AI talent, Asia's industrial heavyweights, and new Middle East ambitions are quietly redrawing the map. **Mehran Gul**, author of *The New Geography of Innovation*, tells Yi-Hwa Hanna why the global centres of progress are already moving

THE GEOGRAPHICAL centres of global progress are shifting. Not because the former heavyweights have fallen, but because others are rising. When Gul – who is also the winner of the Financial Times/McKinsey Bracken Bower Prize, and has served as Lead for the Digital Transformation of Industries at the World Economic Forum – first began exploring this topic eight years ago, he says that "people were still unconvinced that this [evolution of innovation was really] happening." The prevailing view at the time was still that innovation clustered in the same familiar places, where "network effects" would reinforce their dominance. But over the past decade, evidence has steadily eroded that assumption. Today, the shift is visible everywhere: in research output, talent flows, industrial capability, and the expanding definition of what innovation even means.

One of Gul's central arguments is that global progress is no longer determined in the same way. "The idea of innovation has been pigeonholed into simply meaning startups and venture capital," he says. But countries such as Switzerland and Singapore – both highly innovative by global indices yet not defined by unicorns – show that invention also emerges from public institutions, coordinated policy, and large-scale infrastructure. In Switzerland, for example, the country's fully-electric, renewable-powered train system is often cited as a model of innovation. In Singapore, a country that has no major tech companies yet is considered to be a highly innovative country, smart-city infrastructure has been more transformative than any consumer-tech giant. Innovation, in other words, has outgrown the stereotypes that used to define it.

Within this larger global shift, China stands out as one of the most striking examples. Gul highlights the transformative ResNet paper that came out in 2015-2016, often described as the work that changed the concepts and capabilities of deep learning forever. He notes that "none of the co-authors had worked or studied outside of China prior to their landmark breakthrough." All of them had achieved their undergraduate, graduate, and PhD degrees in China, he explains, adding that one of its co-authors, Kaiming He, is now a tenured associate professor at MIT, as well as a distinguished scientist at Google DeepMind. This, Gul says, demonstrates that "homegrown Chinese talent can now punch at the highest level globally when it comes to frontier technologies like AI."

Gul points out that Chinese researchers now make up a plurality of many major AI labs worldwide, echoing Nvidia CEO Jensen Huang's recent observations that over half of the world's talent in AI comes from China. But China is only one example. South Korea, he notes, is often underappreciated. Companies such as Samsung – the only manufacturer to not only survive but thrive through the shift from pre-smartphone to smartphone era – show how older firms can reinvent themselves across multiple technological waves. Hyundai's transformation from a construction company into a leading EV manufacturer, and the rise of SK Hynix and LG, point to a national ecosystem skilled at adaptation. These stories challenge a long-standing assumption that innovation requires creative destruction, and show that it can also come through reinvention.

INTEGRATION OVER ASSIMILATION

Across Europe, Gul sees another pattern: global cities that welcome diverse talent while maintaining cultural identity. Zurich, Geneva, Lausanne, Stockholm – all have world-class research institutions and deeply global workforces, yet remain unmistakably Swiss or Scandinavian. "It is still a highly Swiss city," he says of Lausanne, despite its role as a neuroscience powerhouse and home to EPFL, which attracts some of the world's top researchers. For emerging hubs, this balance – "integration rather than assimilation" – is crucial. This brings the conversation to the Middle East. The UAE and Saudi Arabia have invested heavily in AI, data centres, education reform, and global tech partnerships. The scale is undeniable, though Gul is measured about the timeline: "It is too early to tell whether the investments that they've been making can execute on this without external help just yet." Much of the region's landmark infrastructure was delivered with global partners, yet that does not diminish the importance of the shift now underway. The Middle East is not just investing in technology; it is shaping global technology markets themselves.

> ## 'Global progress is no longer determined the same way'

If there is a single indicator of a region becoming truly competitive, Gul believes it is simple: "Are the smartest people in the world willing to relocate and work in your region?" On that measure, the GCC is gaining momentum. Travel connectivity, ease of business, and rapidly modernising cities mean that visitors who might once have overlooked the region now arrive and reconsider their assumptions. "Somebody shows up to Dubai on a two-day trip and says, 'This is not really what I thought it would be. This is much more modern. I can see how I would prefer living over here,'" he explains. These moments create the talent flows that turn emerging regions into true innovation hubs. For policymakers, Gul emphasises the importance of focusing on youth rather than only attracting established wealth. "The future is in the youth's hands," he says. The Middle East's long-term success, he suggests, will hinge on building indigenous capability through universities, research ecosystems, and coordinated public–private ambition.

Taken together, these insights form the core thesis of Gul's book: that innovation is becoming polycentric. Progress will be shaped by cities and countries that can combine connectivity, talent, and local identity – whether that's Shenzhen, Seoul, Zurich, Bengaluru, or perhaps Dubai and Riyadh. Gul will expand on these ideas at the Emirates Literature Festival 2026 on 21 January in Dubai. His session will explore where the next big ideas are taking root, why they matter, and how they will reshape economies worldwide – a timely conversation for a region at the crossroads of global transformation. **BT**

IMAGE **SUPPLIED**

WORDS
ALEJANDRO BATALLER
Co-Founder and Vice President,
SHA & AB Living Group

OPINION

FROM DESERT TO DESTINATION

How the GCC is shaping the future of wellness tourism

THE GLOBAL WELLNESS economy is experiencing an unprecedented boom, having surged to US$6.3 trillion, and projected to reach an astonishing US$9 trillion by 2028. While the Middle East currently accounts for approximately 2% of the global wellness tourism market, its growth trajectory suggests it's poised to become a major player. The region has been the fastest-growing globally in terms of spending on wellness tourism, showcasing its untapped potential ready to be unleashed. The UAE alone expects its wellness tourism market to hit US$12.5 billion by 2030, with a Compound Annual Growth Rate (CAGR) of 11.7% from 2023 to 2030. This is more than a passing trend – it indicates a paradigm shift, and the GCC is primed to lead the next chapter of global wellness tourism.

At the heart of this potential lies the effort by GCC nations to diversify their economies away from traditional reliance on hydrocarbons. Tourism, and particularly wellness tourism, has emerged as a cornerstone of numerous national visions. This isn't just about building hotels; it's about integrating wellness into the very fabric of new developments, from integrated wellness resorts to health-optimised communities being designed from the ground up.

> ‘The region is creating an unparalleled destination for those seeking rejuvenation’

The region's existing infrastructure already provides a solid foundation. The GCC boasts state-of-the-art healthcare facilities, internationally accredited hospitals, and advanced medical infrastructure that rival the best globally. This strong medical backbone showcases the region's appeal for medical tourism, a sector that is projected to grow to US$889.97 million by 2032 with a healthy CAGR of 10.26%. This isn't limited to just critical care; there's a distinct emphasis on high-quality services and seamless integration of advanced technologies. From AI-driven diagnostics that offer precise health insights to robotic surgeries and emerging tools like quantum scanning, the region is integrating advanced technology to deliver personalised wellness protocols.

What truly sets the region apart is its evolving and comprehensive approach to well-being and longevity offerings. Moving beyond traditional anti-ageing treatments, the GCC is cultivating a diverse portfolio of wellness offerings that draw on its natural landscapes, cultural heritage, and technological infrastructure. This includes preventive precision medicine protocols, mindful movement programmes, cutting-edge biohacking protocols aimed at optimising human performance, and immersive nature-focused retreats that leverage the region's landscapes for holistic rejuvenation.

This strategic approach aligns well with a growing global consciousness on health span. There is a surge in demand for wellness tourism, driven by increased global awareness of mental health, the pursuit of longevity, the need for effective stress management, brain health, and a proactive approach to preventive healthcare. Consumers worldwide are increasingly prioritising health-optimised longevity resorts and seeking science backed integrated lifestyles even when away from home.

SHA Wellness Clinic is one of the world's leading wellness resorts and longevity destinations - and SHA Emirates is set to open in the UAE, between Dubai and Abu Dhabi, in 2026.

The GCC is not merely reacting to these trends; it is proactively shaping them. By making substantial investments in infrastructure, embracing cutting-edge medical technologies, and crafting high-quality array wellness offerings, the region is creating an unparalleled destination for those seeking health and rejuvenation. With ambitious national visions, coupled with a growing ecosystem of wellness innovation, the GCC is not just keeping pace with global wellness trends, it's setting them. For the discerning business traveller, this means a new era where productivity and personal well-being can harmoniously coexist, making the GCC an increasingly attractive and compelling choice. BT

IMAGES SUPPLIED; JULIA/ADOBE STOCK

WORDS
ANNA KOFOED
CEO for the Travel Line of Business
and Board Member for Allianz Partners

OPINION

TRAVELLING SMARTER: AI'S ROLE INCLUDES KEEPING YOU SAFE

The use of artificial intelligence in travel technology has an important and growing role in offering travellers safety and peace of mind — and combined with the human touch, it's a key to the future

FROM SUDDEN weather disruptions to unexpected civil unrest and outbreaks of disease, today travellers are more conscious than ever of potential travel risks, including unpredictable, high-impact events. According to data from the Allianz Partners Travel Index 2025, top traveller concerns included having an accident (44%), extreme weather events (41%), flight cancellations and delays (34%), losing travel documents (25%), and geo-political tensions (15%). No wonder 50% of respondents stated that they purchase travel insurance for peace of mind.

Advances in the usage of artificial intelligence (AI) in the travel sector, however, are redefining how we approach safety, protection, and risk. As these advances continue to shape the future of the sector and a growing number of people travel more frequently, it's time to explore how AI is shifting travel risk management from reactive to proactive.

AI'S IMPACT ON TRAVEL RISK MANAGEMENT

Thanks to advances in the use of AI, predictive analytics, real-time monitoring, and automated response systems are enhancing safety and convenience for travellers.

Today, AI can anticipate risks such as severe weather, disease outbreaks, or political unrest by analysing millions of data points in real time. In doing so, AI can support travellers in adapting to unexpected disruptions — whether in suggesting an alternative route, assisting with hotel and transport rebookings, or automatically processing claims for delayed or cancelled flights.

IMAGE SUPPLIED

> 'Looking ahead, AI-powered wearables may provide live safety alerts, real-time language translation, and emergency assistance'

A LEADING EXPERT IN TRAVEL TECH
Following 22 years at Amadeus, Anna was named CEO for Travel and a Member of Allianz Partners' Board of Management in October 2023.

Personalisation is also advancing — predictive tools can tailor risk assessments and coverage based on individual traveller profiles. Looking ahead, AI-powered wearables may also provide live safety alerts, real-time language translation, and even emergency assistance features.

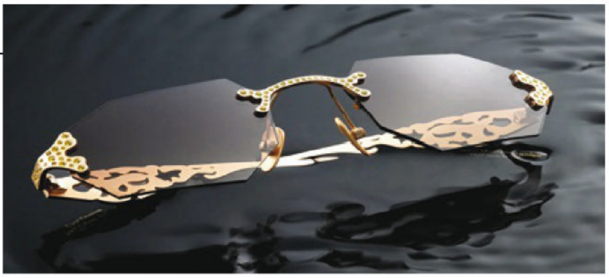
CONSIDERATIONS

While AI holds great promise for revolutionising travel risk management, it brings new challenges. Human oversight, for example, remains critical — not only to manage and interpret AI-driven insights, but also to provide compassionate, real-time support in emergencies. Were a traveller a victim of crime, they most likely would prefer to speak to a real person at the end of the phone and not be directed to a chatbot. While AI can play a critical role in anticipating and identifying foreseeable travel risks, human to human contact remains paramount, particularly in emergency situations.

Data privacy and cybersecurity are also paramount. As more personal data powers AI innovations, insurers must commit to clear privacy policies and robust protection standards. For example, organisations responsible for their employees' safety when travelling abroad might request an AI-powered health assessment to determine their ability to travel. How such information is handled will be an important consideration for organisations, and a question of compliance with relevant data handling laws.

THE FUTURE OF TRAVEL RISK MANAGEMENT

As AI continues to evolve, travel risk management will increasingly blend intelligent automation with human analysis, decision-making, and support. As it does, travel insurance is poised to become smarter, faster, and more intuitive, offering proactive support before disruptions occur and delivering real-time solutions when they do. As it does, travellers will enjoy greater levels of protection against unanticipated distractions, making travel insurance a must-have purchase for any trip abroad. **BT**



THE LUXURY CONNOISSEUR

Yi-Hwa Hanna chats with **Andre Montana**, founder of the Andre Montana brand and acclaimed creator of luxury avant-garde eyewear

Luxury is a term that seems to be used rather widely these days. As someone who deals in fine goods, what does true luxury mean to you? To achieve real luxury, details matter – and the use of the finest materials define the ultimate product. Corner-cutting has become an art in itself these days, and not an honourable one. Sacrificing quality for volume income shows a deep lack of integrity. When thinking of the world of haute cuisine, a celebrated chef is judged not by the flamboyance of presentation but by the depth of flavour. And that, invariably, depends on the quality of ingredients. A single misstep in sourcing can dull the final dish. The same principle holds true in the rarefied realm of luxury goods. If you wish to create something transcendent, you must pursue excellence at every step. While many brands cut corners to streamline cost and speed, the serious luxury craftsman must do the exact opposite: travel further, dig deeper, demand more.

How can you tell the difference between truly excellent materials and those that are sub-par? When you hear "titanium," you should know that not all titanium is equal. In the wrong hands, titanium can merely be a marketing buzzword. In the hands of a master, it becomes invisibility: offering structural integrity without weight, durability without burden. Then there is the art of gold plating. It's a thin veneer of opulence, yes. However, that's only when the foundation is flawless. For my pieces we use three-micron 24 karat plating, a specification that demands control at every stage. If any step is off, the gold peels, wears thin, or loses lustre. That's why I went to Japan recently, because even the finest artisans need conversation, inspection, and mutual challenge to push further.

The cost of luxury goods is higher than ever: a recent report from HSBC found that luxury prices in Europe are now up to 52% higher than they were in 2019. To justify the costs, many high-end brands have taken to explaining the process behind their work. What are your thoughts on this? True luxury thrives in the small things: a hand-engraved motif, the way a gem is seated, the texture of a temple, the junction where metal meets acetate. We source decorative materials from specialised ateliers around the world. From lapidaries and enamelists to micro-engravers, we integrate it all into eyewear as if they are miniature sculptures. While a corner-cutting brand might use the cheapest techniques for faster delivery, true luxury design vocabulary draws from quality influences, but the execution is modern, with ancient techniques dedicated to quality. The cost is secondary to delivering quality, and that's one of the main differences between true quality and mediocre 'luxury'. These classic processes are time-consuming, expensive, and non-scalable. Many retailers would balk at the cost. But here lies the split: mass-produced brands chase economies of scale; genuine luxury brands chase economies of excellence. They are willing to absorb cost so that the client doesn't absorb compromise.

How do customers benefit from brands that take this approach seriously? Walk into any upscale eyewear counter, and you'll see many pieces that are visually similar: the same shapes, the same "trends", the same mould with superficial tweaks. Yet beneath that facade, the construction is often hollow. Corners hollowed out, plating thin, tolerances loose. These are products designed for margin, not soul. When a brand sacrifices materials, repeats moulds, and prioritises volume, the customer loses. They buy what looks luxurious but lacks depth: frames that warp, finish that fades, parts that break, edges that rub or slip. It's the difference between something that lasts a few months or a year, and something that becomes part of your story. The true luxury house doesn't merely aim for beauty with scarcity. It builds with responsibility, patience, and respect. No corner-cutting. Andre Montana speaks not of trends, but of traditions. We don't ask customers to pay for a name, but to believe in a noble standard. When luxury is rooted in sourcing the best, then art, utility, and soul converge. That is the alchemy of true luxury. While compromises reign supreme, it is the contradiction that endures.

Where do you typically travel to for work? I travel all over for my work! USA, Europe, Asia, Middle East - I just returned from Japan meeting with some suppliers for the 2026 collection, and I'm heading in a couple of weeks to Paris for an event. I'll also stop in London and Italy to collect some new discoveries. It's very exciting!

What's the first thing you do when arriving at a new destination? I first take a day to decompress, sip some coffee, prepare my time there, and liaise with my assistant to ensure all my meetings are confirmed. I might look around if it's a new city to me, to get some design inspiration.

What three things do you always pack? A luggage weight checker, because I always come back with heavier luggage; my laptop; and comfortable shoes for a lot of walking.

What is your earliest holiday memory? Travelling with my family from Paris to Morocco, driving through all of France and Spain ever summer. It was so beautiful.

How do you usually spend your frequent flyer miles? I think I have millions of points with Amex and Emirates but haven't used them yet. Good reminder, I'll use them this year! **BT**

IMAGES **SUPPLIED**

CROWNE PLAZA
BY IHG

The Elevator Pitch

Business Traveller Middle East gives **Islam Mahrous**, general manager of Crowne Plaza Alexandria Mirage, five minutes to pitch his property to prospective guests

WELCOME TO Crowne Plaza Alexandria Mirage. We're perfectly situated in the heart of Smouha, one of Alexandria's prestigious downtown districts, where leisure and work blend seamlessly. Positioned centrally in downtown Alexandria's vibrant Victor Emmanuel Square, this hotel offers easy access to commercial streets, banks, shops, and local attractions.

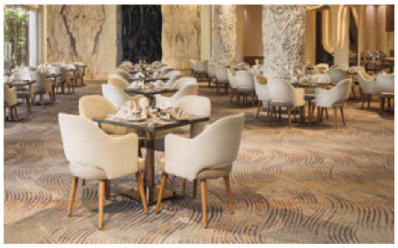
Enjoy a restful stay in one of our 96 rooms, featuring sleek organic design, a calming palette, and smart comforts including a workspace, coffee maker, and premium bedding. Overlooking Smouha Sporting Club, these rooms are perfect for both work and relaxation. For guests seeking additional space, our one-bedroom suites extend the experience with a separate living and dining area, as well as interconnecting options. They are ideal for extended stays or for families seeking comfort, privacy, and premium sleep quality.

Savour international cuisine at The Curve Restaurant, open 24/7 for breakfast, lunch, and dinner. In the evenings, unwind at Harp Bar and Lounge with light bites and live piano entertainment.

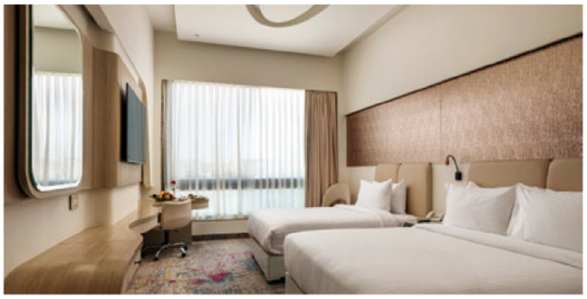
Restore balance at our wellness centre, featuring a serene outdoor pool, a well-equipped gym, steam and sauna rooms, and dedicated massage rooms.

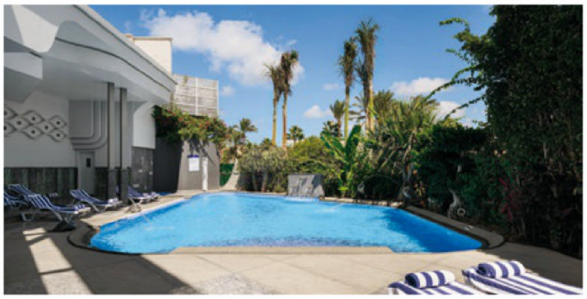
Discover 2,000 sqm of event space at Crowne Plaza Alexandria Mirage, designed for every occasion. Whether it's a board meeting, seminar, wedding, or conference, our five modular rooms and large ballroom can be configured to meet your needs. With natural daylight, easy connectivity, and modern audio-visual technology, we provide everything needed for a smooth experience. From banquets to celebrations of up to 2,000 guests, our expert team is here to ensure your event is both seamless and unforgettable.

With family-friendly features, smart business facilities, and a prime location, Crowne Plaza Alexandria Mirage is more than a hotel — it's your getaway for relaxation, your base for productivity, and your rhythm in Alexandria. **BT**



ABOVE FROM LEFT: Islam Mahrous; Hotel entrance **LEFT:** The Curve Restaurant **BELOW:** Standard room **BOTTOM:** Swimming pool





> 'Positioned centrally in Alexandria, we offer easy access to commercial streets and local attractions'

IMAGES CROWNE PLAZA ALEXANDRIA MIRAGE

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24 HOURS

Amsterdam

WORDS **VANIA KOTHARI**

Culture thrives alongside commerce in the Netherlands' capital and largest city

AMSTERDAM IS A PLACE WHERE heritage meets human design. The city's 17th-century canal ring, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, frames a modern economy built upon wooden logs, creativity, and commerce. Art thrives at every turn here — from Rembrandt's legacy at the Rijksmuseum to cutting-edge galleries that push the boundaries of contemporary expression. For the visiting executive that's also a culture enthusiast, this is a place that recharges the mind as much as the itinerary.

24 HOURS

Lorem Ipsum

WORDS **YI-HWA HANNA**

Lorem ipsum Ignatiur? Sae ventotate

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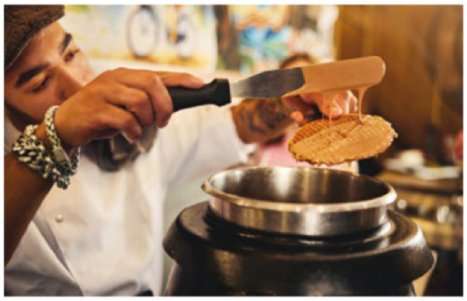
IMAGE **AVANI HOTELS AND RESORTS AMSTERDAM MUSEUM QUARTER**

WORDS
VAMA KOTHARI

Van Gogh Museum 0,4
Museumplein 0,5
Stedelijk Museum 0,5
Concertgebouw 0,6
Rijksmuseum 0,7

STEDELIJK MUSEUM AMSTERDAM



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: The Museum Quarter; Stedelijk Museum; Sonora; Stroopwafel Workshop at Avani Museum Quarter Amsterdam Hotel

BOTTOM: The outdoor winter ice-skating rink at Amsterdam's Museumplein, open until 30 January 2026

MORNING

Start your morning at Saint-Jean, a café locals swear by for its flaky croissants and coffee that might just be Amsterdam's finest. Tucked away on Lindengracht 158h in the charming Jordaan district, this bakery-deli hybrid offers limited seating but endless appeal. If you're a matcha enthusiast, we suggest you pay a visit to LERA, where the iced matcha latte is whisked to perfection and served in handcrafted ceramic bowls. Both spots are ideal for lingering by the window, where you can watch cyclists stream past as the city slowly wakes. Once you've had your morning caffeine fix, make your way to Museumplein, Amsterdam's cultural heart. The Van Gogh Museum and the Rijksmuseum stand side by side, home to some of Europe's most remarkable masterpieces. If you lean toward the modern, make the Stedelijk Museum your next stop: it's smaller, quieter, and often more thought-provoking, with exhibits that are more focused on inviting and encouraging reflection.

AFTERNOON

After your visit(s) to the museum, the canals are your playground. Book a canal ride through for a glimpse of Amsterdam from its best angle, or try a stand-up paddleboard (SUP) session if you want to mix sightseeing with a bit of movement. When hunger calls, go classic. Order Dutch comfort food like bitterballen or erwtensoep, or try a classic croquet at a cosy museum-side brasserie. Brasserie Keyzer is a great pick for lunch: the menu offers local favourites alongside a much-loved classic steak tartare, in a classic, intimate environment. If you're nursing a sweet tooth, follow up your meal with a quick stop for fresh stroopwafels — a classic Dutch treat that's ideally consumed warm, straight off the iron at a nearby local street market. Better yet, take a waffle-making class and learn to create the golden caramel treat yourself — the Avani Museum Quarter Amsterdam Hotel offers an authentic Dutch Stroopwafel workshop in its pantry, from which you'll even receive an official "waffle master" certificate. If you're more keen on burning off the sweet treats the country is famous for — including poffertjes (small, fluffy mini-pancakes) and appeltaart (Dutch spiced apple pie) — you could join the trendy locals taking a warm yoga or Pilates class at Saints and Stars. One of the city's most stylish luxury workout destinations, it has four locations in the city, one of which is within a two-minute walk from the Avani Museum Quarter Amsterdam Hotel, and a five- to ten-minute walk from the museums. Amsterdam is one of a handful of places worldwide to host a prestigious HYROX Major event, and this recurring host city has a dedicated HYROX scene. Joining in a workout at one of the many official HYROX partner gyms will likely see you training next to the athletes preparing for the upcoming HYROX World Series of Fitness, which takes place at RAI Amsterdam from 22-25 January, 2026. If you'd prefer to get your heart rate up while also enjoying an iconic way to see the city, you could also rent a bike and cycle along the canals in time for sunset. From the Herengracht to the Golden Curve, it's a beautiful way to see more of the city. Waffle-making and workouts not your thing? Talk a walk through Dam Square instead: the area is a meeting point of history, shopping and people-watching. After your retail therapy, you can soothe your weary limbs with a massage at the Anantara Spa, which overlooks the Royal Palace right on Dam Square.

> 'The museums are home to some of Europe's most remarkable masterpieces'

EVENING

Wind down your day with an expertly-crafted beverage at Sonora, a Latin-American skybar with a gorgeous city view, inside the NHow Rai Amsterdam. Come supper, the hotel's Selva restaurant offers a killer 360° view of the city. For die-hard foodies, Amsterdam is also home to a many outstanding fine dining and Michelin-awarded options including Vinkeles, Spectrum, Vermeer, De Kas, and De Silveren Spiegel. **BT**

Emirates and KLM Royal Dutch Airlines operate direct flights from Dubai to Amsterdam, while Etihad Airways operates daily non-stop flights from Abu Dhabi.

IMAGES ALLARD SCHAGER/GETTY IMAGES; JL MARSHALL/WIKIPEDIA; GUIDE.MICHELIN.COM;

WORDS
YI-HWA HANNA

Mindful movement

SANCTUM, the sensational Dutch-born mindful movement brand designed to "empower the body and expand the mind" has partnered with Jumeirah to bring its signature sequence to Dubai's Jumeirah Beach Hotel and Abu Dhabi's Jumeirah Saadiyat Island. Previously only available in the UAE at SIRO One Za'abeel, where it was launched exclusively this summer, the movement is now spreading across the country and in a new format: at the beach. While the signature Sanctum well-being workouts are still available daily in the studios of SIRO One Za'abeel, now, you'll also be able to try it at the beach at these two Jumeirah properties. The al fresco sessions launched with eight in total (for now). The first four took place on 8 November in Dubai and 9 November in Abu Dhabi — and you can catch the next ones at 8-9am and 5-6pm on 13 December at Jumeirah Beach Hotel, or 8-9am and 5-6pm on 17 January at Jumeirah Saadiyat Island. Each event is ticketed at AED 215 per person, and given how popular it is, advance booking (at wearesanctum.com/experiences/dubai) is recommended. Described as an extremely cathartic experience, Sanctum's beachfront sessions are elevated with a tailored music playlist created exclusively for Jumeirah.

IMAGES **SUPPLIED**

LONGEVITY

FLYING FOR VITALITY

AS THE ANNUAL Dubai Fitness Challenge galvanised the city into action last month, Expedia put its wealth of data to good use by studying travel patterns related to wellness in the region, reporting a 45% surge in "Vitality Travel" across the UAE. Expedia's data showcased a surge in demand for wellness-driven stays at properties that put longevity and revitalisation at the heart of their guest experience. As travellers increasingly seek more than just rest and relaxation, hotels and resorts with science-led programmes that offer spa as well as diagnotics, nutrition and rejuvenation therapies, plus ways to boost longevity, are becoming standouts. Searches for wellness-led travel to Dubai and Ajman have risen, with 145% and 130% year-on-year growth respectively — beating out traditional wellness travel hotspots such as Bali in Indonesia (at +115%) and Switzerland (at +80%).

WELLNESS BRUNCH

Nourishing oneself from the inside out

IF YOU'VE EVER HAD a wellness treatment or experience that left you feeling so good you wish you could go even deeper, you're in luck: there's now a holistic wellness-themed brunch that's presented as Dubai's first-ever "Conscious Brunch" — where your holistic life can coincide with your social life, and elevate your well-being from the inside out. Found at SOHUM Wellness Sanctuary — a luxury wellness spa and Ayurvedic centre in Dubai's Al Quoz area — the Conscious Brunch is a new take on Dubai's notorious brunch scene. At this brunch, available every Sunday from 1-4pm, you'll find a curated menu of dishes that aim to feed the body, mind, and soul. The menu is priced at the spiritually-linked numbers of AED 111 for the Standard Package, and AED 222 for the Holistic Package, with both including three dishes and unlimited mocktails, Matcha, Ceremonial Cacao, and Ayurvedic drinks, and the latter including a one-on-one Ayurvedic consultation, as well as access to the spa's wet areas (including a sauna, steam room, and hot and cold plunge pools). The menu includes starters such as edamame and kale salad, mains such as a Lion's Mane slider and 'Conscious Egg' -centered dishes, plus classic desserts.

DID YOU KNOW?
Lion's Mane mushrooms help improve cognitive function

WORDS
YI-HWA HANNA

A JOURNEY INTO THE NEW YEAR

All aboard Flight 2026

AMELIA DUBAI — a Beirut-born concept that's brought gothic glamour to Downtown Dubai since it opened in 2022 — is taking on a travel theme for its upcoming New Year's Eve celebrations. Called "Flight 2026" and presented as "a luxurious ascent into the new year", the party begins at 7pm. Guests are invited to treat the evening as a journey in mood and reflection, as they celebrate all that 2025 held through grand F&B offerings, tunes spun by DJs, and live performances, before they welcome the new year as a new path to embark on. While the dress code is more about glitter and glamour than being aviation-coded, and the flight aspect is more in the concept than in the decor or presentation, the restaurant's retro-futuristic, steampunk-inspired interiors are a fanastical way to let your imagination run wild as you picture the next stop on your life's journey. It also offers spectacular views of the Burj Khalifa fireworks. Packages start from AED 1,500.

FUTURE DINING

Dubai's first AI-themed restaurant is here ⏩

A NEW, SCI-FI-WORTHY spot has landed in Downtown Dubai. WooHoo Dubai — an artificial intelligence-themed venue at Kempinski The Boulevard — is led by "Chef Aiman", an avatar for what is said to be the world's first AI chef. Developed by Gastronaut Hospitality, WooHoo proclaims that it's not a restaurant, it's "a place where food meets technology to create something truly special." It uses holograms and other tech for an experiential space that alights multiple senses. Chef Aiman's neural engine, trained on decades of culinary research, molecular food science, and thousands of global recipes, designs dishes based on data, which are then brought to life by human consulting chef Reif Othman and executive chef Serhat.

Fun fact: Cipriani's Carpaccio was first served in **1950** in Venice. Try the iconic dish at Cipriani Bahrain!

IMAGES **SUPPLIED**

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YI-HWA HANNA

TOP DINING PICK

Indulge in decadent dim sum delights

ORIGINALLY hailing from London's Mayfair area, the chic Mimi Mei Feir opened its doors in Downtown Dubai a year ago to much fanfare — and now, it's launched an epic new brunch. Enjoy it on the terrace, where you'll get spectacular views of the Burj Khalifa throughout the beautiful outdoor winter season, or settle in indoors, where the venue's signature Art Deco East-West glam will transport you to the era of 1920s Shanghai. The Dim Sum Dynasty brunch takes place every Saturday from 12:30pm until 4pm, with three packages starting from AED 198 per person. The deal includes a basket of 13 appetisers and handcrafted dim sum, with unlimited servings through which you can enjoy the stars of the show to your heart's (or stomach's) content. This is followed by an individually-selected main course, then a shared dessert platter, all accompanied by free-flowing beverages. The food is as outstanding as the decor, and whether you're looking to catch up with friends, impress a client, or catch up with a loved one, it's now one of the most unique, sophisticated, and stylish brunches in the city.

THE BAG

Tickled pink

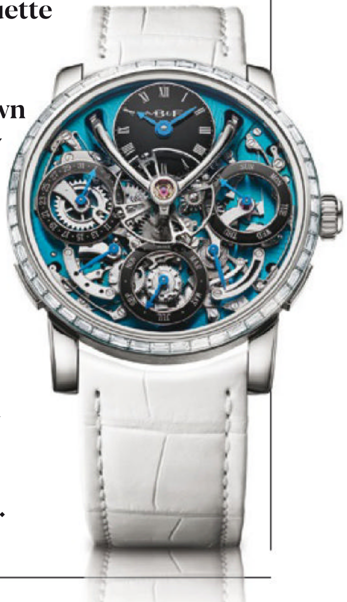
Rimowa's new line of Ballerina Pink suitcases offers fans of the brand a new take on its signature design

LOOKING TO IMPRESS the pastel-lover in your life this festive season? This'll do it — and make a jazzy statement through any airport. This seasonal collection reinterprets the German maison's iconic travel pieces in a soft, ethereal rose titled Ballerina Pink, with everything from the handle to the zipper and badge in the hue, giving it a seamless, monochromatic appearance. The suitcase (available in Essential Cabin, Check-In, and Trunk Plus sizes) is made of premium polycarbonate, as well as cross-body bags, toiletry pouches, phone cases, packing cubes, tags, and straps. You can also opt for an add-on set of pink wheels.

From AED 300 to 6,000.

THE WATCH

Collector's Trophies



This year marks the 75th anniversary of the partnership between Swiss watchmaker MB&F and its Dubai partner Ahmed Seddiqi. The two companies have commemorated this milestone by crafting two limited edition pieces both powered by MB&F's award-winning Perpetual Calendar calibre: 7 LM Perpetual EVO pieces and 5 LM Perpetual Baguette Diamonds pieces, both featuring signature blue highlights. MB&F is known for its vision for "fiercely unconventional machines" inspired by everything from science fiction and industrial design to kinetic art, disrupting traditional horological notions. With only seven and five pieces each respectively, these rare pieces are true treasures.

Price upon request

IMAGES SUPPLIED

Travel Tech Gift Guide

'Tis the season for giving, and what better way to offer a gift that keeps on giving than smart technology? Check out these picks frequent flyers are sure to appreciate

Samsung Galaxy Watch8

From AED 1,199

The thinnest Galaxy smartwatch to come from the Korean tech giant, compared to its predecessor, this polished, sleek smartwatch has a brighter-than-ever display, a new 3nm chip for better performance, a longer battery life, and enhanced AI features that offer personalised guidance. Beyond the freedom that any good smartwatch should offer — allowing you to stay connected with emergencies and important notifications, yet focused on your work and life away from the pull of constantly checking your phone — the hands-free Galaxy AI integration makes it shine, particularly during business travel. When you're on the go, voice commands handle the essentials, from setting reminders, to checking calendar appointments and responding to messages, all without touching your phone The health tracking, integrated with Google's Gemini assistant, adds depth: advanced sensors and deep-learning algorithms aid with everything from heart rate to sleep patterns, while the AI-powered Energy Score forecasts daily performance by analysing your physical and mental readiness. Love running? The AI-led Running Coach can provide real-time feedback as well as training plans. Meanwhile the 3,000-nit display remains perfectly readable even in the most intense sunlight. Watch enthusiasts will appreciate the extensive selection of customisable dials, that can give you the feeling of wearing a different mechanical watch every day while maintaining all the smart functionality.

WORDS
YI-HWA HANNA

Samsung Galaxy S25 Edge

From AED 2,730

At just 5.8mm thick, the Galaxy S25 Edge is Samsung's slimmest flagship yet, and while this impressive device is a boon for any smartphone user, it's an exceptional pick for those who conduct plenty of business travel. The standout feature is Gemini AI's travel planning capability. Samsung began using its integrated Galaxy AI features with the launch of its S24 series in 2024, but this latest edition has expanded upon those benefits with AI agents that seamlessly integrate across multiple apps. A Live function allows you to show Gemini what you see through your camera, and have real-time conversations about it. Daily routines and task management act as a defacto personal assistant in your pocket through the Now Brief and Now Bar features. A simple voice query can calculate travel time from one destination to another while automatically factoring in travel time. For complex itineraries, it can deliver reverse-calculated timelines with restaurant recommendations and Google Maps integration — exceedingly handy when planning multi-stop client meeting days across Dubai. The cross-app coordination excels: ask it to find a rooftop bar, for instance, and it'll search for it, save details to Samsung Notes, and send WhatsApp messages with location pins — all from one natural request. Circle to Search provides instant information on restaurants and attractions, while Live Translate handles real-time calls with international clients. The battery life, while the weakest in the S25 lineup, still outlasts the S24 series. The trade-offs? Voice recognition struggles with local place names, and heavy users will need midday charging. Still, for business travellers with powerbanks or easy charging access, the S25 Edge's combination of portability, AI-powered planning tools, and premium hardware makes it a genuinely practical and

Ray Ban Meta (Gen 2)

From AED 1,392

Even the first-ever version of these pioneering smart glasses was enough to make one feel like *Iron Man*'s Tony Stark. Combining a beloved eyewear brand with audio and camera qualities, Gen 1 – released in October 2023 – came in two styles, the iconic Wayfarer and the Skyler. The integrated AI functionality allowed users to enjoy hands-free commands, make calls, and answer general questions, making it incredibly easy and liberating for travellers to capture memories and navigate their surroundings without having to pull out their phones – a feature that is not only convenient, but can also offer a sense of safety, whether through increased situational awareness or not having to worry about phone-snatching theft. By November 2024, a software update could enable the "Be My Eyes" feature, through which a volunteer can 'see' through the glasses' camera and provide audible feedback through its speakers — potentially life-changing for people with reduced vision. Alas, battery life was a slight problem: a full charge only lasted up to four hours with moderate use, and could drain in as quickly as 30 minutes with heavy use. The Gen 2 model solves that, with a significant improvement that takes this up to 8 hours of moderate use, three to five hours of heavier use, and up to 19 hours of standby time. Content quality has also undergone a major boost: where Gen 1 could only record video in 1080p, Gen 2 can shoot in 3K Ultra HD if you wish (and even offers slow motion and hyperlapse capabilties). Motion stability is improved, and microphones record sound with less background noise. When you're listening to music, there's less external audio pollution for those around you — and to the relief of anyone who feels discomfort about the contentious privacy aspect of these devices, Gen 2's on-frame LED light that indicates recording is in process is brighter, making it feel less creepy for the wearer, and fairer to those around them. Improved AI tech enhances the informational use with a handy chatbot — which can offer live translation in six languages. Packed into a frame that is only slightly heavier (by 2g) yet sturdier, it's a great gadget for active explorers and tech-savvy busy professionals.

IMAGES **SUPPLIED**

WORDS
YI-HWA HANNA

Apple AirPods 4

From AED 549

When Apple's AirPods 3 came out, they made waves around the world due to one majorly buzzworthy feature: a native live translation feature. For travellers, a function like this can be a game-changer, providing real-time, in-ear translation that can enable cross-cultural conversations like never before. At first, it was only available in five languages, with four more added later. This feature is available on the latest AirPods 4, along with the added benefit of Active Noise Cancellation (available for the first time in the AirPods range), a new Siri Interation feature that allows you to take or reject calls with a head movement, and an H2 chip offering better sound quality. This model swaps out the Lightning charging port for a USB-C port, making it easier for those on the go with similar devices to ditch the old cables.

Therabody SmartGoggles 2nd Gen

From AED 805

Whether you struggle to sleep on the go (or even at home), long for a way to reduce eye strain and headaches, or simply want a tool that can aid you with deeper rest (and meditation!), these clever smart goggles are essentially a sleep mask or performance enhancer. Using a combination of heat, vibration, and compression massage, they help to soothe your weary eyes (a particularly useful device for people with heavy daily screen use), reducing stress, soothing tension, and improving sleep. The second generation now offers a 100% blackout design that fits more comfortably due to redesigned contours and better padding, as well as better battery life, and a lighter overall weight for even more comfortable wear. It's also quieter, solving a common complaint from its still-popular first edition.

UPERFECT
CLIMATE PLEDGE FRIENDLY
4K 17.3
VESA
500 Nits
100%

Uperfect 17.3" 4K Portable Monitor

From AED 1,230

While many travellers are always on the lookout for smaller, sleeker devices to carry on the go, there are still those among us who miss the convenience and efficiency of a second monitor. This portable display – available with fast shipping via Amazon – is a nifty way to enjoy a dual-screen set-up while you're travelling. The colours are crisp and vibrant with 100% Adobe RGB, while unlike many other portable screens, this one comes with 500 nits of screen brightness (compared to the typical 200-300 nits max-out found in many competitive picks), and a 1500:1 contrast ratio. The built-in speakers and 180° kickstand helps you skip any additional gear if you wish, but you can easily pop it into an adjustable portable monitor holder if you prefer. It has two type-C ports plus HDMI connection.

AirTag
NFC
Bluetooth LE
Ultra Wideband

Apple AirTag Four-Pack

From AED 439

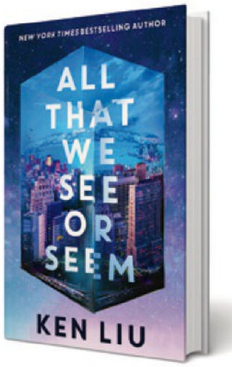
For travellers juggling multiple bags, gadgets, and more, Apple's AirTag acts like a quiet safety net. Once paired through the Find My app, it uses Bluetooth (and, on iPhone 11 or later, ultra-wideband tech) to guide you straight to misplaced items with on-screen distance and directional cues. The battery lasts about a year and can be replaced easily, while its water- and dust-resistant build holds up well in transit. Slip one into checked luggage or a laptop sleeve and you'll always know exactly where your gear has gone — long before the baggage carousel tells you. If you tend to forget where your car is parked, poppping one of these in your go-to vehicle can help you locate it using the Find My app's Precision Finding feature. AirTags can even survive in shallow water at a depth of up to 1m for 30 minutes.

IMAGES SUPPLIED

WORDS
NIVEA SERRAO

READ

All That We See and Seem
by Ken Liu



LIU, an award-winning master of speculative fiction, delivers a tightly-plotted, character-driven chase elevated by his signature emotional depth and sharp insight. Former hacking prodigy turned bounty hunter Julia Z embarks on a cross-country search for Elli Krantz, an artist who uses AI to craft vivid dreams for paying clients, forcing her to confront her own past. As Julia navigates danger, guilt, and an AI-driven art world, the novel becomes both a propulsive thriller and a meditation on creativity in an algorithmic age.
AED 91.82; amazon.ae

LISTEN

Maintenance Phase

Maintenance Phase

CUT THROUGH THE NOISE of modern wellness culture with research-driven analysis and engaging commentary as hosts Aubrey Gordon and Michael Hobbes unpack health trends, debunk misinformation, and explore the cultural forces behind our wellness obsessions. It's smart, funny, and genuinely empowering. Perfect for anyone seeking clarity in a noisy health landscape.
Available on Spotify.

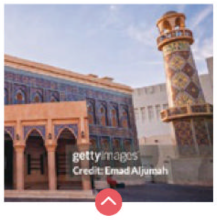
WATCH

Frankenstein

Master of gothic horror Guillermo Del Toro (*Pinocchio*) transforms Mary Shelley's iconic tale into a visually stunning and emotionally-layered masterpiece that explores creation, responsibility, and identity. Oscar Isaac (*Dune*) and Jacob Elordi (*Saltburn*) step into the titular role of the mad doctor and his creature, respectively, while Mia Goth (*Pearl*) and Christoph Waltz (*Dracula*) round out this star-studded cast. Available on Netflix.

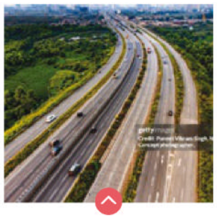
CULTURAL CALENDAR

OUR PICK OF EVENTS TAKING PLACE AROUND THE WORLD



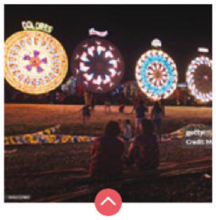
Qatar International Art Festival, Qatar
(7-12 December)

This annual fixture in the region's cultural calendar brings together artists from more than 70 countries for a week of exhibitions, live painting, workshops, and cultural dialogue. In this seventh edition, thousands of visitors are set to descend on Katara Cultural Village and take in Doha's flourishing creative landscape while enjoying the seasonally mild weather.



Indian Racing Festival, Navi Mumbai, India
(13-14 December)

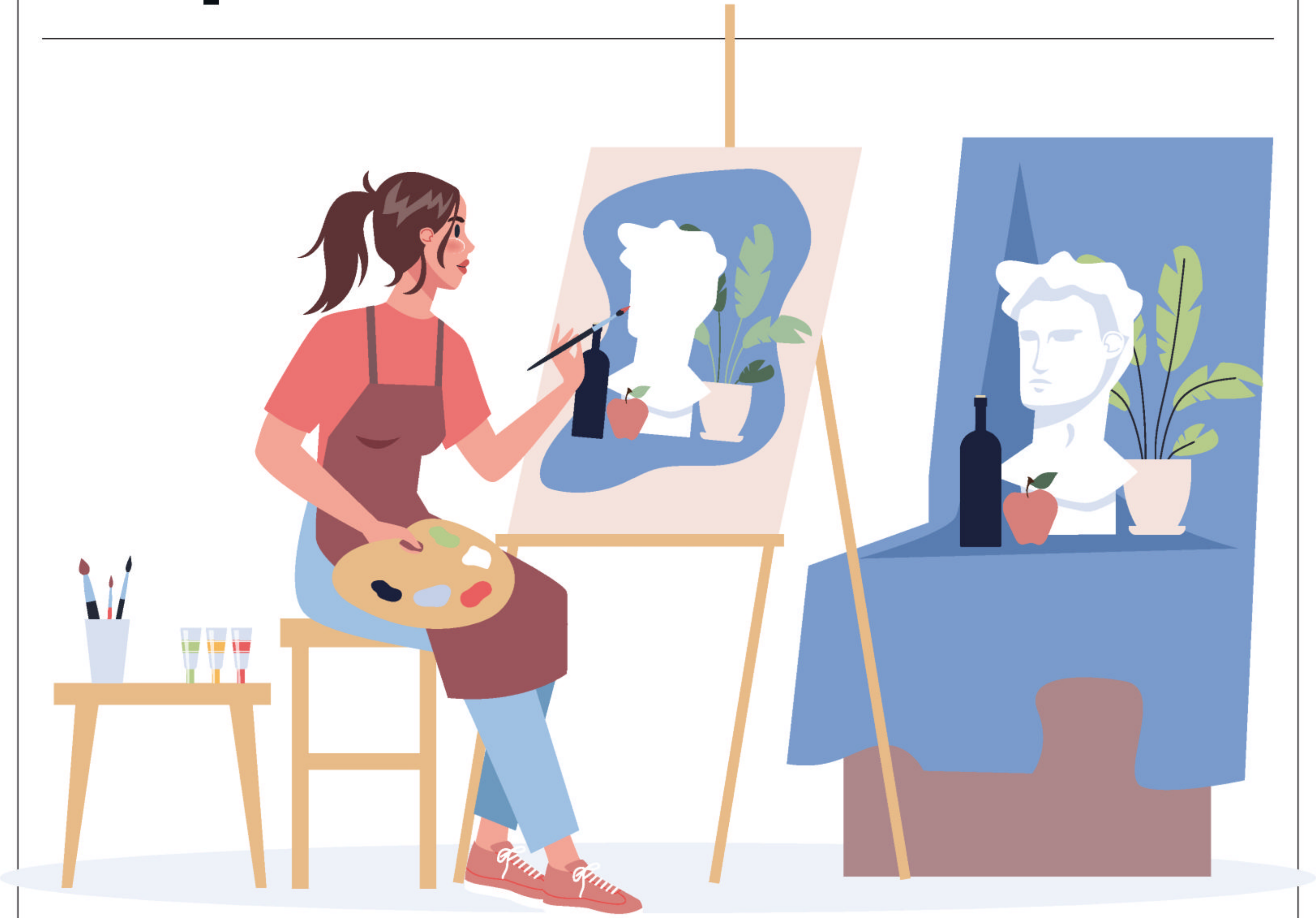
This year's finale marks a historic moment for Indian motorsport as it prepares for its first-ever street race in Navi Mumbai. As teams and spectators gear up for the last showdown, the city's urban roads will transform into a dramatic circuit. The result promises a thrilling fusion of racing precision, high-speed energy, and big-city spectacle.



Giant Lantern Festival, San Fernando, Philippines
(13 December - 1 January)

This annual celebration transforms the city into a dazzling display of Filipino craftsmanship. Here, massive, meticulously-engineered lanterns light up the sky in synchronised patterns, creating a stunning fusion of tradition and technical artistry. It's a vibrant, music-filled celebration that draws visitors from around the world and captures the warmth, creativity, and communal spirit of Filipino holiday traditions.

IMAGES SUPPLIED; GETTY IMAGES



Our guide to... art-centric hotels

Travellers are increasingly seeking hotels that double as cultural destinations – places where art, design, and local stories shape the stay. We take a look at some properties offering more than comfort by delivering authentic experiences, creative inspiration, and a new sense of place

AS MORE travellers expand their definitions of what luxury means to them, arts-driven hotels are rising fast. By weaving in local culture, curated collections, and creative programming, these stays offer authenticity, distinction, and emotional resonance, meeting the growing demand for meaningful, mood-lifting experiences.

1 HYATT CENTRIC CAIRO
Set near the Giza Pyramids and the Grand Egyptian Museum, this hotel bills itself as Egypt's first "art-lifestyle" hotel, collaborating with 11 local artists to infuse contemporary Egyptian art throughout its interiors. For the first time in Egypt, the hotel also boasts an in-house podcast and guitar studio. It also happens to have a 10,225-square-foot pool with Cairo's only built-in billiard table – yes, located inside the swimming pool .

2 ART'OTEL LONDON HOXTON
In Shoreditch's street-art heartland, art'otel London Hoxton, powered by Radisson, is effectively a vertical living gallery. Large-scale original Banksy pieces frame the entrance, while resident artist D*Face's pop-inflected works run through bedrooms and public spaces. An in-house gallery hosts rotating exhibitions, and guests can step straight out into one of the world's most densely tagged street-art neighbourhood. To add to the fun, inside each room, guests will find a folio containing blank paper with colourful markers, inviting them to jot down a drawing or visual memory of their stay. The best pieces end up in a special guest gallery, that can even win prizes for a future visit.

3 MINOS BEACH ART HOTEL
This hotel on Crete's northeastern coast doubles as an open-air museum. More than 70 sculptures from the G. & A. Mamidakis Foundation are scattered between its whitewashed bungalows, pine trees, and the sea, encouraging guests to wander the grounds as they would a gallery.

IMAGE INSPIRING.TEAM/ADOBE STOCK

WORDS
YI-HWA HANNA

4 SIX SENSES IBIZA

Six Senses Ibiza leans into the island's creative energy as much as it does its sunsets. The Beach Caves complex folds in a recording studio, performance space, and bar, attracting local musicians and international names, while the resort's cultural programming spotlights fashion, art and community stories from the island.

5 THE DOLDER GRAND

Perched above Lake Zurich, The Dolder Grand boasts a serious in-house collection with more than 100 works by around 90 artists, including Takashi Murakami and Salvador Dalí, displayed throughout public spaces and corridors. Its blue chip collection was curated by the owning Schwarzenbach family, the pieces turning the hotel into an informal art trail against an Alpine backdrop – which guests can explore via an Art i-Pad tour.

6 XVA ART HOTEL

In Dubai's Al Fahidi Historical Neighbourhood, this boutique hotel occupies a restored traditional courtyard house once belonging to the Seddiqi family. Regional architectural details and shaded courtyards frame an on-site contemporary art gallery, while rooms feature works by regional artists and designers. Staying here places guests inside one of the city's key heritage enclaves, with art shows and a café drawing in Dubai's creative community.

7 THE LANA, DORCHESTER COLLECTION

Dorchester Collection's Middle East debut features a permanent art collection with more than 50 pieces commissioned from international as well as local artists. Curated by Parisian duo Gilles & Boissier as part of the hotel's interior design, guests will find these artworks throughout the hotel, from its public spaces to suites.

8 THE SILO HOTEL

A reimagined grain silo above Cape Town's V&A Waterfront, The Silo Hotel is explicitly "a sanctuary celebrating art, style and design." Its pillowed-glass façade crowns Zeitz MOCAA below, home to Africa's largest collection of contemporary African art, and guests can easily combine a stay with museum visits and gallery-hopping across Cape Town's creative districts.

9 VILLA LA COSTE

Set within Château La Coste's 600-acre estate of vineyards and sculpture park in Provence, France, Villa La Coste anchors a property where art and architecture shares equal billing with its liquid offerings. Its 17th-century farmhouse is complemented by contemporary pavilions and installations from architects and artists such as Frank Gehry, Oscar Niemeyer, and Tadao Ando, with an art trail that rivals many urban museums.

10 THE CONNAUGHT

This hotel in London's Mayfair has a 3,000-piece collection across its corridors and suites, featuring works by Barbara Hepworth, Damien Hirst, Louise Bourgeois, Julian Opie, and others. Outside, Tadao Ando's *Silence* water feature and Tom Stuart-Smith's *Garden of Illusion* extend the art trail into Carlos Place. For guests, it's effectively an encyclopaedic private gallery woven into a grand London hotel.

Hyatt Centric Cairo

11 DRAWING HOTEL

This 48-room hotel in Paris, France – aptly located near the Louvre – is built around a love for contemporary art. Founder Carine Tissot also created the Drawing Society and Drawing Lab, the first private art centre dedicated to contemporary drawing, which is housed within the property. Each corridor bears the vision of a different artist, and an in-house "art conciergerie" steers guests toward Parisian galleries and cultural events beyond the hotel.

12 BYBLOS ART HOTEL VILLA AMISTÀ

In the Valpolicella hills outside Verona, Byblos Art Hotel Villa Amistà, an SLH Hotel, pairs a 16th-century Venetian villa with one of Italy's largest private collections of contemporary art and design. Works by Damien Hirst, Anish Kapoor, Lucio Fontana, Giorgio de Chirico, and others appear throughout rooms and gardens, turning the property into a "living museum" where historic frescoes meet bold installations.

13 ALTSTADT VIENNA

Altstadt Vienna feels like staying in a collector's townhouse. Owner Otto E. Wiesenthal's personal collection of more than 300 works, largely by Austrian artists, lines its rooms and salons, while an in-house art manager offers tours and temporary exhibitions on the ground floor. The result is an intimate, gallery-like hotel embedded in Vienna's artistic Neubau district.

14 THE SIAM HOTEL BANGKOK

Occupying three acres on the Chao Phraya River, The Siam is frequently described as part hotel, part museum. Designed with strong Art Deco influences, it showcases around 25,000 antiques and curios collected by its owners, from vintage cinema posters to Southeast Asian sculptures, creating a stay that feels like sleeping inside a private art collection.

15 THE NED DOHA

Housed in a former Ministry of Interior building on the Corniche, The Ned Doha combines a member's club, hotel, and a major regional art collection. More than 350 works by almost 100 artists from Qatar, West Asia, and North Africa are displayed across its public spaces and rooms, with roughly 70% created by women.

LOCAL FLAVOUR In celebration of UAE National Day, this month, Rixos Al Mairid Ras al Khaimah has partnered with The Arabian Gallery to a present a curated exhibition of 20 iconic photographs by Sir Wilfred Thesiger, on display until 21 December. **BT**

IMAGE **SUPPLIED**

TIME FOR A CHANGE

PULLMAN'S GLOBAL REBRAND IS A LEGACY THAT'S BUILT TO LAST

WORDS **YI-HWA HANNA**

Here's a fun fact you may not realise about the Pullman brand: it actually started aboard a train. In 1859, George Pullman – an American engineer and industrialist born in New York – had founded a company in Chicago, Illinois. He designed and manufactured the Pullman sleeping car: a high-end train car that could be used with a parlour-like setting during the day, then converted into a sleeping cabin at night using upper berths that would fold into the walls, and lower berths that could otherwise form seats. The first edition of this revolutionary invention, completed in the 1860s, was aptly called the Pioneer.

The sleeping car became a runaway hit, changing the future of rail travel irrevocably. Pullman became a term synonymous with railway carriages offering travellers extra comfort, and it was celebrated as the go-to name for railroad dining cars, lounge cars, and sleeping cars, that were primarily built and operated by the Pullman Company for over 100 years. By the early 20th century, the Pullman cars were accommodating 26 million people per year, effectively being considered the largest hotel in the world that just happened to operate on wheels.

Pullman's influence soon expanded to Europe. Belgian businessman Georges Nagelmackers made a trip to the US in 1867-1868, after which he founded a Pullman-influenced company called Georges Nagelmackers & Company in 1872. This later became the Compagnie Internationale des Wagons-Lit (CIWL). Alongside the fast-growing rail industry and its associated networks, the CIWL began investing in the construction and management of hotels. As the CIWL's collection of hotels continued to grow worldwide, and the Pullman brand's popularity heightened, many of the CIWL's top hotels were turned into Pullman Hotels. French multinational hospitality company Accor acquired CIWL in the early 1990s, and to this day, Pullman remains the oldest hotel brand in the Accor portfolio.

Where Vision Meets Legacy

Since 1859, Pullman has reimagined what it means to travel, meet, and connect. Pullman's storied history is a pioneering one, and as the world continues to evolve for a new type of traveller, the brand is returning to its roots through a global rebrand that remains true to its origins, while also looking to the future. On 11 November, at the inaugural TOURISE Summit held in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, Benoît Racle – global brand president for Accor's Premium division, which includes the Pullman hotel brand – and Kerry Healey – Accor's chief commercial officer for Premium, Midscale, and Economy in the Middle East, Africa, Türkiye, and Asia-Pacific – made a major announcement: a global brand transformation for Pullman Hotels & Resorts.

Pullman's new era begins with a refreshed design language and a new community-led approach. The next chapter in the brand's legacy is one built around exchange, that redefines the hotel as a dynamic social stage. Designed to reflect the fluid rhythm of today's traveller, meeting and event spaces across Pullman's hotels worldwide are being reimagined with flexibility at their core - these are places designed to transform with ease from keynote venue to creative studio; from workshop arena to cultural runway. They celebrate the belief that exchange thrives in environments built for possibility.

Demonstrating this sentiment is a new flagship event series: the Pullman xChange. An experiential gathering that will transform hotels into a living cultural platforms, the Pullman xChange events will be held at various Pullman properties around the world. Its inaugural edition was held from 13 to 14 November 2025 in the UAE, wherein Pullman Dubai Downtown was transformed into a live forum for creative collision. The Dubai-based event was developed with the House of Beautiful Business – a global think tank and community connecting business, technology, and the arts – and the experience explored ideas, innovations, and cultural shifts under the theme "Build What Outlasts You". Each future Pullman xChange will bring together hospitality leaders and a global community of creatives and thinkers, where together, they will aim to cultivate a new era of purposeful gatherings, thought leadership, and exchange across continents.

ABOVE: Social connection takes shape at the Pullman Lyon

The inaugural Pullman xChange's programme featured immersive workshops, artistic performances, and discussions led by pioneering voices including Abdulaziz AlJaziri, Deputy CEO & COO of the Dubai Future Foundation; neuroscientist Hannah Critchlow; cyberpsychologist Elaine Kasket; Michelle Kaufmann, head of R&D for the Built Environment at Google; and architect Adib Dada. The event promised to blend dialogue, artistic expression, and sensory experience, and it delivered on that promise through an itinerary filled with thought-provoking discussions on how to curate our best futures, what deserves to remain, and how to build in a way that doesn't just cater to fleeting trends, but that transforms us, and the world around us, in a way that lasts. "This is beyond experience. This is about human connection," Healey says. The next three editions of the Pullman xChange are planned to take place in Europe, Asia, and South America in 2026, with each edition co-created with a cultural collective to reflect local context.

A Portal To A Bold New World

One striking expression of the new brand language is the Pullman Portal. Inspired by the railway tunnels of Pullman's past, these sculptural features are intended to act as entryways marking one's transition into a distinct world of exchange. Although every Pullman property will feature a Pullman Portal, each will be interpreted locally through materials, form, and colour. The first one in the world is already ready to be experienced at the recently-renovated Pullman Dubai Jumeirah Lakes Towers in the UAE, while upcoming portals are set to feature at Pullman Perth Airport in Australia, and Pullman Hamilton in New Zealand.

A New Culinary Stage

Another key part of the new Pullman experience is its food and beverage offering. Culinary and mixology experiences sit at the heart of the brand's appeal, and with F&B service being a globally-understood means of bringing people together through

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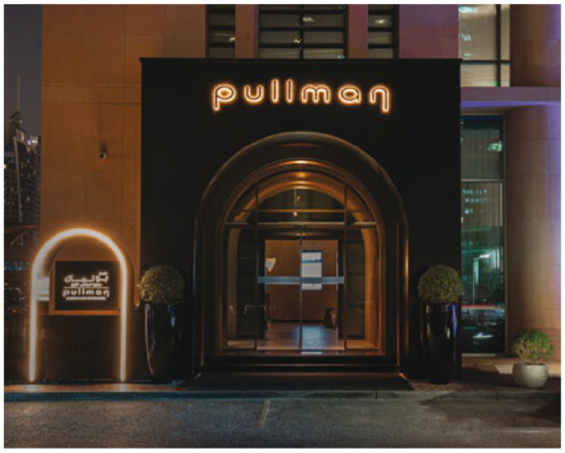
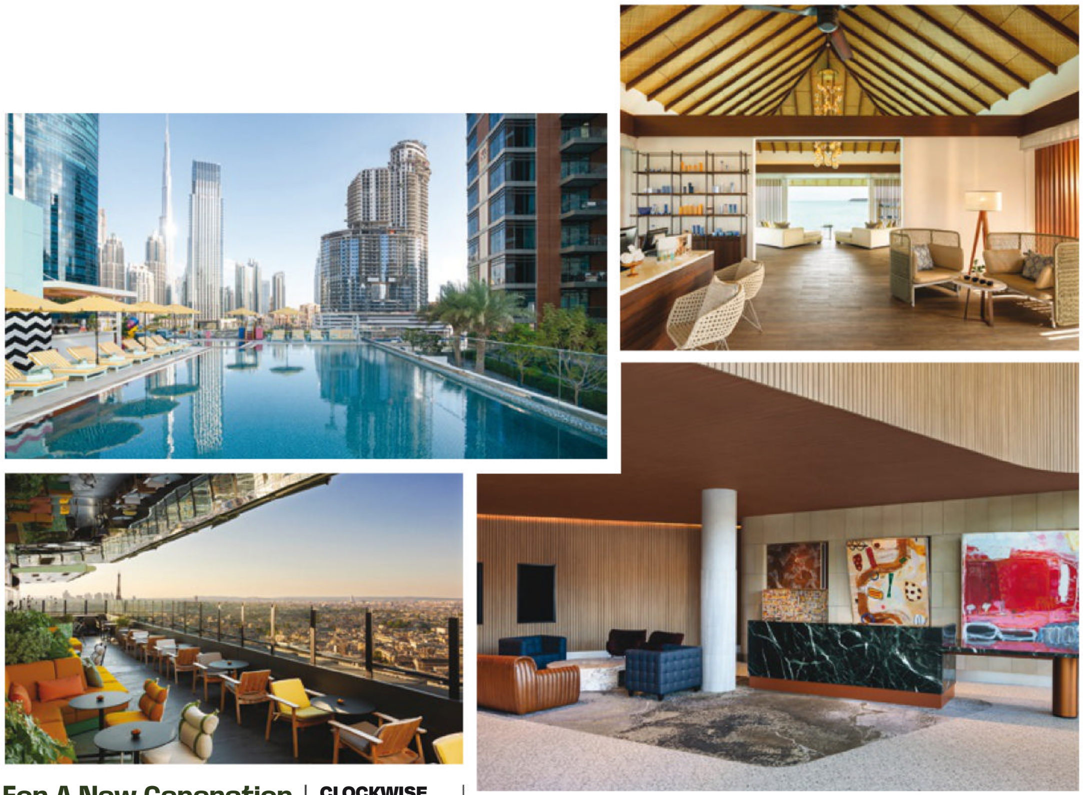


BOTTOM FROM LEFT: Benoît Racle; The first-ever Pullman Portal, at Pullman Dubai Jumeirah Lakes Towers

IMAGES SUPPLIED

environments that foster social interaction, cultural exchange, and a sense of community, it's natural for this to be a key part of Pullman's exchange-centric philosophy. In the brand's new era, bars will take centre stage as social anchors, and more of its menus will prioritise spontaneity, shareability, and global flavours that encourage guests to stay, mingle, and discover. In 2026, Pullman will also launch Unexpected Pairings: an experiential bar ritual that can be found at each property, inviting guests to draw from a deck of playing cards to discover imaginative flavour combinations of food and drink while encouraging playful curiosity and provoking conversation.



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Pullman Dubai Downtown; Pullman Maldives Maamutaa; Pullman Sydney Penrith; Pullman Paris Montparnasse

Human-Centric Service For A New Generation

As the era of artificial intelligence approaches, Pullman is doubling down on the importance of human connection – and that ethos begins with its own teams. As Healey explains, the brand isn't shying away from the adoption of technology, but their approach is to use it for the background tasks that will free up their teams to focus even more deeply on their human-focused service. Over the past 18 months, around 60% of Pullman's 20,000-strong global team - dubbed "Heartists" – has completed its new learning programme focused on empathy, cultural awareness, and connection-building. The brand's service culture is grounded in emotional intelligence, empowering the Heartists to blend confidence, intuition, and genuine human warmth within every guest interaction, as they respond to guests not only more efficiently, but with greater insight and sincere care.

New Momentum for Growth

Pullman already has 150 hotels in more than 40 countries, and in line with its new brand identity comes a major growth strategy: it has more than 70 projects in the pipeline, and part of its efforts to strengthen its global presence is the launch of multiple new key destinations across the Middle East, Asia, the Pacific, Europe, and Africa. It's aiming to surpass the 200 mark of hotels and resorts within the next five years, with upcoming openings set to include Pullman Royal Key Wellness Resort in Guadeloupe, Pullman Kolašin Breza in Montenegro, and Pullman Tokyo Ginza in Japan by 2026 and beyond.

"Pullman's transformation marks a bold step into the future - one that fuses our heritage of movement and modernity with a renewed sense of purpose," says Racle. "Each hotel is conceived as a place of exchange, where ideas and people move freely, fostering creativity and connection. Launching this transformation alongside Pullman xChange felt instinctive, as the event truly brings our brand philosophy to life. It embodies our new spirit - dynamic, connected, and alive with possibility. And this is only the beginning of a movement that will continue to unfold across our hotels worldwide. **BT**

Pullman Dubai Jumeirah Lakes Towers

The hotel features a redesigned lobby, a new check-in experience, and a new café.

Pullman Resort Al Marjan Island

The first Pullman resort in the UAE, this property opened in February 2024 with 300 rooms and suites, plus a private sandy beach.

Pullman São Paulo Ibirapuera

The hotel is also currently undergoing a transformation, including renovated guestrooms and a refreshed restaurant.

Pullman Hai Phong Grand Hotel

This hotel in the heart of Vietnam's Hai Phong City opened in March 2025 with 364 rooms, six dining venues, and an outdoor pool.

Pullman Seoul Eastpole

This recently-opened hotel has 150 rooms and suites with direct access to the subway, and a panoramic-view 22nd-floor indoor pool.

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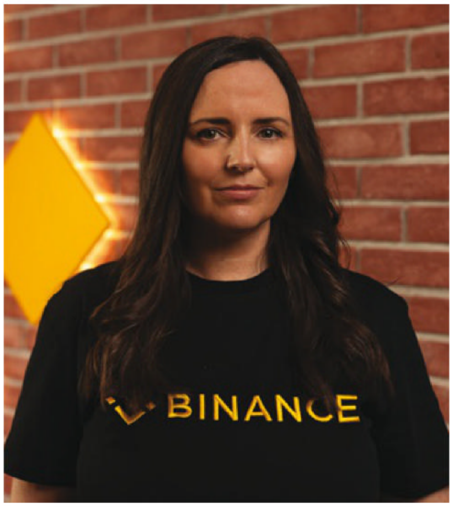
Behind the Curtain

Behind The Curtain: How Binance Builds Its Biggest Global Event



WHEN MOST PEOPLE experience Binance Blockchain Week, they see the polished version: industry icons on stage, an arena packed with energy, and conversations that echo far beyond the two days in Dubai. The occasion is the flagship event for Binance, the world's largest crypto exchange by users and trading volume.

What attendees don't see is the scaffolding behind it – the months of coordination, the late-night calls across time zones, and the delicate balance between creativity and compliance that must underpin every announcement, speaker bio, and panel title. Yet for **Kim Murphy, Head of Global Event Marketing at Binance**, this invisible architecture is where the magic – and the hard work – really begins. "Every global event starts with one pretty standard fact: aligning teams across time zones and priorities takes months of groundwork before a single speaker is lined up," she explains.

It is a process that forms the backbone of an event that sits at the very top of Binance's 1,500+ global events: the one moment each year where every part of the ecosystem converges.

A Balance of Vision and Responsibility

Much of Murphy's work revolves around ensuring that Binance Blockchain Week remains both ambitious and responsible. As she notes, "Creativity is balanced with compliance; every headline, speaker bio, and panel topic speaks to a varied audience, from community members to regulators."

That equilibrium shapes the way partners are selected, how themes are structured, and how conversations are positioned. "When crafting Binance Blockchain Week, each and every collaboration has a clear purpose and consistent oversight," Murphy explains. Relevance also plays a defining role. Murphy says, "Timing is everything. Choosing the right moment in the market cycle can transform the event from a conference into a defining industry moment." The most complex component, she adds, is building the agenda itself. "The toughest part is the content, ensuring that we are striking the balance between deep institutional insight and the excitement that energises the crypto community."

More Than A Global Stage

For attendees, the impact of Binance Blockchain Week often extends beyond the schedule. As Murphy puts it, "Binance Blockchain Week isn't just built on the stage, it's the energy in the venue, the experiences we provide onground, and the way people talk about it afterward."

This year's edition reflects that ethos, bringing back a format designed to unite builders, regulators, founders, investors, educators, and community members under one roof. At its core, Binance Blockchain Week serves as a meeting point for learning, collaboration, and connection among the top minds in crypto – and an opportunity for anyone attending to meet, and potentially work with or learn from, someone new.

Binance's identity as a community-driven platform remains central to the event's purpose. Binance Blockchain Week stands as a representation of that commitment, supported by a region whose evolving landscape is paving the way for blockchain advancements beyond Web3.

Shaping the Next Wave of Web3

Returning to Dubai's Coca-Cola Arena on 3-4 December 2025, Binance Blockchain Week will gather some of the most recognisable voices in the industry.

The speaker lineup includes leaders from across exchanges, smart contracts, education, regulation, investment and more – among them Michael Saylor (Strategy), Brad Garlinghouse (Ripple), Lily Liu (Solana Foundation), Raoul Pal (Real Vision) and CZ (Giggle Academy / Binance Co-Founder). They join builders and analysts such as Avery Ching (Aptos Labs), Alex Svanevik (Nansen), Sandeep Nailwal (Polygon Labs), Rene Reinsberg (Celo), and Christian Angermayer (Apeiron Investment Group).

Binance leaders – including Yi He, Richard Teng, Rachel Conlan, and Catherine Chen – will also take part, alongside Celo as Title Sponsor and Solayer and NEXPACE as Platinum+ Sponsors.

Across two days, the event will blend high-level discussions with community touchpoints, creating an environment where insight and accessibility meet. Once the curtain is drawn, for Murphy, the final measure of success is simple: "When it's over, we ask the question: did we just host another conference, or did we help shape the next chapter of Web3?"

For the Binance team and attendees alike, Binance Blockchain Week is more than a celebration. It is a platform that amplifies the industry's most influential voices and pioneering projects, fostering collaboration and insight into the future of blockchain technology.

To book your passes for the event, visit: binanceblockchainweek.com

Coca-Cola arena
BINANCEDUBAI

IMAGES **SUPPLIED**

THE HOT LIST

WORDS
YI-HWA HANNA

Along with thoughts of new professional and personal goals, one of the other most exciting aspects of a new year is the potential for new adventures, and the travels we can plan for the months ahead. As you settle in to your well-earned end-of-year wind-down, and your mind turns to where you might head next, we've rounded up some of the most interesting destinations on the global travel radar for the coming year. From adventure trips and wellness retreats to buzzing cityscapes, minibreaks filled with cultural charm, doses of nature, and plenty more, read on to discover *Business Traveller Middle East*'s list of the most highly-anticipated trending destinations for 2026.

IMAGES **GETTY IMAGES, ADOBE STOCK**

SARDINIA, ITALY

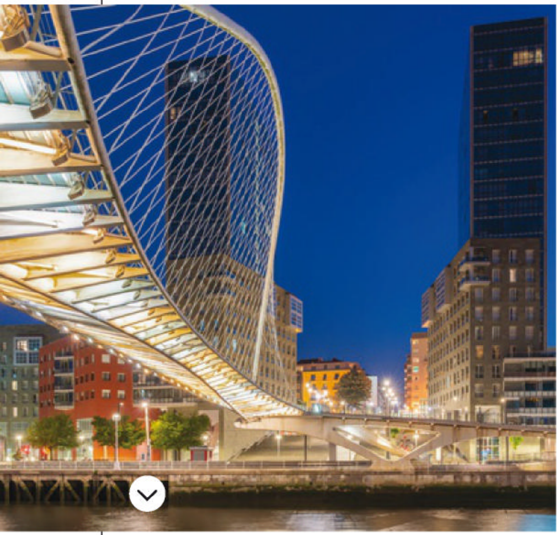
Italy has never been a stranger to eager tourists, but with traditional hotspots like Rome, Florence, and the Amalfi Coast now feeling the strain of overtourism, smart travellers have turned their attention to a part of the country situated just left of the boot-shaped mainland: Sardinia. The second-largest island in the Mediterranean after Sicily, luxury-seekers can head to the Costa Smeralda to enjoy lush views of the turquoise waters that have earned it the nickname 'the Emerald Coast'. Aside from its crowd-free beaches, the scenery also serves up dramatic cliffsides, petrified forests, and evocative archaeological sites. It's little surprise that it was named among *Lonely Planet*'s "Best in Travel" for 2026, and Expedia has also identified it as a top trending destination for the coming year.

RED SEA, SAUDI ARABIA

As the kingdom works steadily towards its Vision 2030 goal, The Red Sea is fast becoming one of the most exciting new tourism destinations in the Middle East. Drawing in local, regional, and international travellers alike, the first resorts there opened in 2023 and 2024, including Six Senses Southern Dunes, St. Regis Red Sea Resort, and Nujuma, A Ritz-Carlton Reserve, followed by the Red Sea Global-owned Shebara and Desert Rock resorts. In 2025, the highly-anticipated Shura Island began welcoming guests, with a handful of luxury hotels plus its highly-anticipated Shura Links golf course. Its first hotels include The Red Sea EDITION, SLS Red Sea, and InterContinental Resort Red Sea. As the destination continues to develop, it's set to be a major tourism hotspot in 2026.

IMAGES FRANCESCO RICCARDO IACOMINO/GETTY IMAGES; CHRISTIAN/ADOBE STOCK

> ‘Experts claim that Beijing’s touristic appeal may even surpass that of Paris within the next decade’



BILBAO, SPAIN

Bilbao made it onto Skyscanner's trending destinations list for 2026, with UAE-based travellers' searches for it having increased by a whopping 167%. In 2025, Emirates added a third daily flight to Barcelona, and Etihad Airways partnered with Air Europa, launching flights from the UAE's capital to Madrid — making it easier for GCC travellers to hop onto internal connections from those hubs. The rise of astrotourism will also place Spain's Basque Country onto the wishlist of travellers that enjoy travelling to catch a glimpse of a rare celestial event: A total solar eclipse will take place on 12 August 2026, and the best places to watch it from include Iceland, Greenland, and Spain — with specific places in the latter including Bilbao, Mallorca, Ibiza, Menorca, Burgos, and Vitoria-Gsteiz. This astral appeal has also earned Bilbao a spot on *National Geographic*'s list of the best places in the world to travel to in 2026. Visitors would be remiss not to visit the Frank Gehry-designed Guggenheim Museum Bilbao, or the chance to go pintxos bar-hopping in the picturesque Casco Viejo (Old Town).

OKINAWA, JAPAN

Wellness tourism is on the rise across the world, and as longevity becomes an increasingly appealing pillar of wellness travel, the world's "Blue Zones" — places with an exceptionally high concentration of people who have lived up to 100, with long lives in good health — are now in the spotlight more than ever before. This island in the south of Japan is one of them. With stunning white-sand beaches, sparkling blue waters that even allow for some of the glassiest surf in the world with a very long swell window, and captivating marine life to explore — not to mention a number of interesting cultural sites to visit — it's easy to see where its appeal lies. The destination is also a champion for sustainability — even making it onto Expedia's Unpack'26 list of trending destinations with Expedia's confirmation that it aligns with the World Travel and Tourism Council's six actions for sustainable tourism management.

BEIJING, CHINA

Tourism to China's mainland has been on the rise in recent years, and with plenty of new routes flying there from the Middle East — not to mention a whole swathe of new hotels and resorts from coveted international brands — it's clear that its holiday-ready future looks bright. While the country is enormous and contains a wide variety of types of destinations to visit, Beijing remains one of its most popular spots. Not only is the city a centre of innovation, making it a hub for tech enthusiasts and business travellers alike, it's also home to a number of majorly significant historical and cultural sites, including the Forbidden City and the Llama Temple. Experts claim that it's on track to become one of the world's powerful city destinations by 2032, to the point that it may even surpass Paris in international touristic appeal within the next decade.

PHU QUOC, VIETNAM

This up-and-coming part of 'the land of the ascending dragon' is fast shaping up to be the next big island destination in East Asia. A large number of international resort brands have either already opened or are under development there, including La Festa, Curio Collection by Hilton, New World Phu Quoc Resort, and Rixos Phu Quoc Hotel. The destination is already a popular holiday spot among travellers from South Korea, China, and Russia, but each year, its number of international tourists continues to rise. As more direct flights there launch from East Asia, and more global connections follow, this once-sleepy fishing village is readying itself for not just a tourism boom, but an absolute transformation. So what's the appeal? Pristine beaches, vibrant marine life, cultural attractions, jungles, mountains, and markets all in one place — plus a casino and an amusement park to boot.

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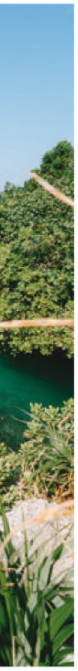

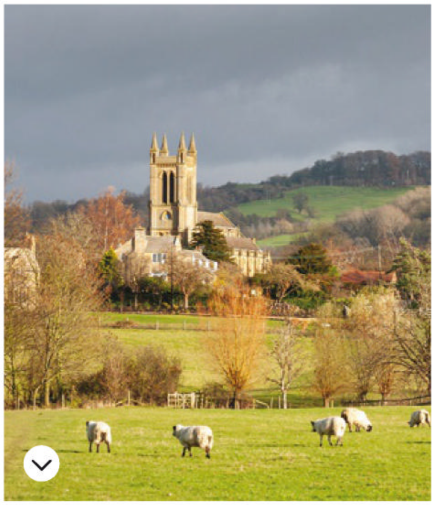

THE COTSWOLDS, UK

As the trend for slow travel continues to grow, one part of the UK is shining more than ever: the picturesque rural region known as The Cotswolds. Covering Gloucestershire, Oxfordshire, Wiltshire, Somerset, Warwickshire, and Worcestershire, tourists are increasingly drawn to the immersive, blissfully quiet, nature-filled haven with its charming, highly-Instagrammable villages. It offers plenty to do, from reading retreats to long country walks, cosy pubs and fairytale-worthy tearooms, lush spas, historic sites, and workshops on everything from cooking to craft-making, birding, pottery, silversmithing, and more. With easy access via train from London, it's proven to be an appealing 'detour destination' from The Big Smoke, with more and more travellers opting to stay for longer than a day trip to enjoy the break from the hustle and bustle. With a growing number of high-profile visitors showcasing the area, from celebrities to online content creators, this official 'Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty' was also named in a global Expedia report as one of the fastest-growing destinations for 2026.

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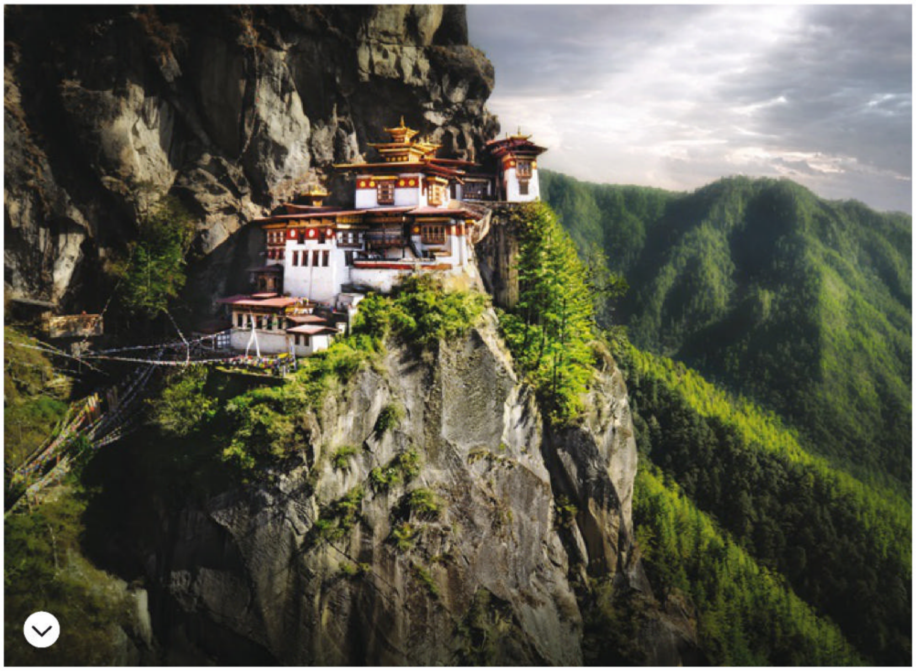


PARO, BHUTAN

A recent report from Skyscanner revealed that travellers from the UAE are eager to explore more of the world's less-trodden paths, with destinations such as Varna, Bilbao, Krabi, and Bengaluru on their list of rising stars for 2026. Paro — a valley town in western Bhutan where the iconic Tiger's Nest Monastery is located — is among them, with searches for the destination up by 149%. Travellers are enticed by Paro's tranquility and spiritual appeal, bolstered by crisp air, mountain views, and unique wildlife, plus a new twice-weekly Drukair flight between Paro and Dubai making it easier to access for GCC travellers. With new luxury hotels set to open there in the next few years, including one from Pemako Hotels and two from Taj Hotels and Resorts, it's a chance to get in before the crowds come.

VARNA, BULGARIA

In summer 2025, Wizz Air's Abu Dhabi operations became the first and only airline to offer a direct route between the UAE capital and Bulgaria's "Pearl of the Black Sea". Although the carrier closed its Abu Dhabi hub in September, Wizz Air did recommence flights from the UAE capital by October — and although Varna-UAE routes aren't back on (yet), one thing that *has* remained is interest in the destination. A Skyscanner report found UAE travellers' searches for Varna have increased by 344%, with many drawn in by its golden beaches, ancient Roman ruins (including Roman baths), and coastal strolls. A more affordable and less-crowded alternative to other European seaside haunts, you can still get there via indirect flights on flydubai, Emirates, Turkish Airlines, and Etihad.

BASEL, SWITZERLAND

In August 2024, flydubai became the first UAE airline to launch direct flights to Basel — and the new route has contributed to the fact that Skyscanner data shows UAE travellers' searches for Basel have now risen by 70%. This historically-rich city in the northwestern corner of Switzerland also happens to be in a unique tri-border location, found at the confluence of the Swiss, French, and German borders — making it an ideal jumping-off point for travellers who want to make the most of their time in Europe by incorporating day trips or extending their travels across more of the Schengen Area. Meanwhile, a SmartFlyer report shared that cultural currency is impacting travel trends for 2026, with buzzy, timely cultural events creating a major draw for global travel. The flagship Art Basel event, which takes place in Basel each June, and the Basler Fasnacht — the largest carnival in Switzerland, which takes place between February to March each year — adds to the location's prominence. This year-round destination also offers a series of coveted festive markets during the winter season. **BT**

The inaugural TOURISE Summit gathered global leaders from tourism, government, technology, and beyond to map the sector's next chapter – and together, they're ready to set a new benchmark

WORDS **YI-HWA HANNA**

THE TOURISM OF TOMORROW

IMAGES GETTY IMAGES, ADOBE STOCK

Tourism has always been one of the world's most interconnected industries – but until now, it has never had a single global platform designed to convene leaders from across government, business, investment, and technology under one umbrella. That was the ambition behind the inaugural TOURISE Summit, held from 11 to 13 November in Saudi Arabia, under the patronage of His Royal Highness Prince Mohammed bin Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud, Crown Prince and Prime Minister. More than an industry gathering, TOURISE was created as a future-shaping platform: a place where cross-sector deals are initiated, collaborations are forged, and entirely new tourism models begin to take form.

Across its first edition – which followed the 26th United Nations Tourism General Assembly, that also took place in Riyadh – the summit brought together heads of state, tourism ministers, CEOs, investors, technologists, and cultural leaders, not for passive discussion, but to accelerate action. By day one, more than 8,000 registered attendants and 140+ speakers from across the world were set to take part over the course of three days. TOURISE aims to drive the next 50 years of tourism, positioning itself as the annual meeting point where the global tourism agenda is set. With Saudi Arabia's tourism sector rapidly expanding, the kingdom offered both the infrastructure and the momentum needed to debut a platform of this scale.

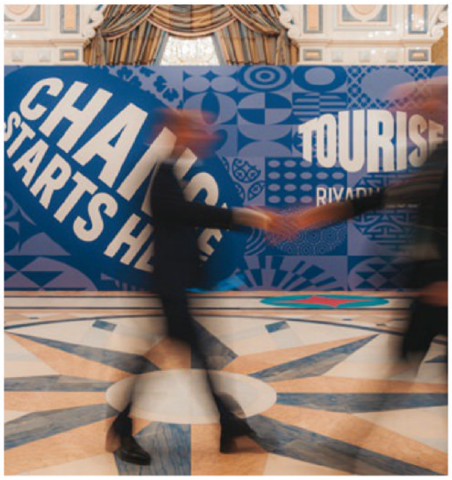
Fostering a growing, more complex industry

The conversations and announcements in Riyadh reflected the sector's growing complexity. Tourism is no longer only about destinations – it is also about sustainability, cultural exchange, entertainment ecosystems, hospitality transformation, the integration of cutting-edge technology, and the investment that supports it all. TOURISE was built specifically to address this multidimensional landscape, giving industry leaders a place to coordinate, share solutions, and build partnerships that extend beyond a single country or region.

During his opening speech, His Excellency Ahmed Al Khateeb, Minister of Tourism of Saudi Arabia and Chairman of TOURISE, stated that there has never been a more urgent or opportune moment for the convergence of sectors to shape global tourism, with the tourism sector having rebounded to historic highs, and international arrivals and investment surpassing pre-pandemic levels. However, he cautioned that at the same time, the sector faces unprecedented challenges and opportunities: rapid technological disruption, a generational shift toward sustainable and experience-driven travel, and an imperative to build resilience in the face of economic and environmental uncertainty and growing fragmentation around the globe.

"TOURISE is more than an event, it is a platform for action where we will solve for the challenges that have long limited tourism's full potential. Among them are challenges in skills, investment, infrastructure, sustainability, and digital transformation. It's a space where we will work hand in hand to deliver the best outcomes for everyone: returns for investors; more accessible destinations and affordable experiences for travellers; [and] jobs and prosperity for communities as the demand for travel increases. We are not here just to discuss ideas. We are here to act. That is why TOURISE exists," he said.

BELOW: US$113 billion in portfolio investments were catalysed at the Summit



Major announcements and deal-making

Among its many outcomes, the summit marked the launch of new collaborative frameworks and strategic alliances designed to support global tourism development. By convening public and private leaders in the same space, TOURISE enabled conversations that rarely happen at traditional travel events – the kind that lead to large-scale projects and long-term cooperation. In a sector where fragmentation has often stalled progress, the

BOTTOM: The Summit was held at King Abdulaziz International Conference Center in Riyadh

IMAGES (ADOBE STOCK); COURTESY OF TOURISE

PULLMAN PORTAL
TOURISE
RIYADH 2025
TOURISE
RIYADH 2025

ability to create alignment at a global level may ultimately be one of TOURISE's most significant contributions.

Some key announcements made at the event include Amek Group's reveal of its new ultra-luxury destination collection, Seven Legends; Accor's unveiling of a new global identity for its Pullman brand; a 10-year roadmap from HALO Space to make near-space tourism a reality (with Saudi Arabia aiming to be the first country in the world to host commercial flights to the edge of space); and the *Principles for Transformative Tourism*, a cross-sector, cross-industry blueprint for harnessing travel and tourism's potential as a net-positive force for people and planet, led by the World Economic Forum.

In one dramatic signal of how the global tourism landscape is shifting, after day one, TOURISE had announced that an eye-catching US$113 billion in portfolio investments had been already been catalysed at the summit – a scale rarely seen in industry convenings. More than dealmaking, it was a statement of intent: that the next era of tourism will be designed through collaboration across borders, sectors, and disciplines, and that Saudi Arabia intends to sit at the centre of that conversation.

The announced portfolios cut across the full breadth of the visitor economy – from luxury hotels and next-generation resorts to wellness, lifestyle, retail, aviation, AI-powered platforms, and destination development. The roster of participating companies read like a who's who of global hospitality and regional heavyweights, including Melia, Minor, BWH Hotels, GOCO Hospitality, Radisson, Red Sea Global, Dar Al Arkan, Knowledge Economic City, Rua Al Madinah, and MATARAT Holding, among dozens more.

What unified these commitments was a recognition that the future of tourism depends on hard infrastructure paired with human capital, and on data, design, and service excellence fused into new visitor experiences. Many of the investments were Saudi-focused, reinforcing the kingdom's fast-rising competitiveness as a global destination built on culture, innovation, and world-class hospitality standards. The goal is clear: to turn vision into bankable partnerships and high-impact deals that will ripple across the industry for years to come.

Embracing – and creating – a brighter future

Another major launch was the publication of a white paper created as a collaborative effort between TOURISE, The Future Laboratory, and Together Group. The report, titled *New Codes of Luxury: Elevating the Hospitality Guest Experience with AI*, examines how AI will redefine service, personalisation, and the meaning of luxury for a new generation of global travellers. Shortly after its launch, a new pioneering protocol for intelligent travel was revealed: The Agentic Tourism Initiative. This universal digital framework promises to transform every stage of the traveller's journey, inventing travel through agentic tourism. TOURISE addressed AI's role in tourism in a big way, also launching a new destination initiative that aims to work with government, international organisations, academia, and the private sector, to transform destinations into living laboratories for tourism innovation.

The event's thoughtfully-curated talks, led by experts and leaders from The Future Laboratory, Virgin Galactic, HUMAIN, Amadeus, Columbia University; Expedia Group; Oliver

ABOVE: Pullman's global rebrand was a key announcement at TOURISE

RIGHT: An attendee explores VR technology at the Summit

BOTTOM: The three-day event opened with a keynote address and a series of cultural performances

I see technology
that makes life easier
TOURISE

IMAGES YI-HWA HANNA; COURTERSY OF TOURISE

Wyman; and tourism leaders from a multitude of countries, touched on topics such as the impact of climate change; the technologies reshaping tourism; the design of future-ready urban environments; data-driven reinvention; new ways to unlock global connectivity; the development of mega-events as tourism catalysts; policy changes; and even space tourism.

The preservation of heritage and culture

Alongside an eagerness to embrace cutting-edge technology, was an intention to face the future in a way that honours the past. The issue of overtourism, for instance, was addressed with the view that crowd management can be transformed into an opportunity to inspire new discoveries. Dispersion could help to highlight underserved destinations, generating income in new areas while enabling more people to share their stories, and offering more chances to educate on history and culture. This isn't restricted to the adaptation of existing destinations – it also applies to the creation of new ones. The transformation of undeveloped spaces into destinations of global appeal can not only catalyse economies but also open minds, helping to break down barriers, foster empathy, and build bridges between cultures and communities. In a session centered on this topic, Fahd Hamidaddin, CEO of Saudi Tourism and Vice-Chair of TOURISE, explained how this power can be amplified further by offering new narratives and fresh perspectives that challenge stereotypes and spark curiosity. On balancing heritage with the creation of tourism destinations, he told *Business Traveller Middle East* that one advantage emerging destinations have over established ones is the chance to build with both residents and visitors in mind from the outset. "This attachment to a certain base of home – I think that's going to be a concept that changes," Hamidaddin said. "The fact that we're coming late in the game, while being the largest investor in tourism, that gives us an advantage. [Saudi Arabia] can learn from everybody else. And I think we were humble enough to go and ask for advice from everybody that we believe succeeded, and those that have been facing challenges as well. Among the greatest advice we got was to stay authentic. So we created a model of "AI" where A means authenticity, and I is for innovation. Authenticity and innovation do not compete but interact with each other. And that guided us a lot," he explained. Hamidaddin is grateful that the country's leadership takes pride in not only improving the kingdom's future, but also by doing so in ways that can help to make the world better: "We're trying to rise for the world, not just for us. The convergence that we're seeing [at TOURISE] will create opportunities in other countries, in other businesses, not necessarily ours. But just by being there, being that facilitator will yield added value for us."

THE TOURISE AWARDS

A GLOBAL ACHIEVEMENT

The winners of the inaugural TOURISE Awards were also announced at a glittering ceremony and gala dinner held during the summit. Nominations opened on 2 June 2025 and drew entries from leading destinations and businesses around the world, with the shortlists announced on 9 September, before the winner reveal on 12 November.

RIGOROUS JUDGING & VOTES

The TOURISE Awards celebrates the destinations setting new global benchmarks in culture, creativity, and visitor experience. Judged by an independent cross-sector panel of global leaders from fashion, travel, the arts, and hospitality. They aim to highlight the international destinations reshaping how the world travels.

TOKYO: THE BEST OVERALL DESTINATION IN THE WORLD

Tokyo emerged as the standout winner for 2025, securing three major titles including Best Overall Destination, Best Food & Culinary, and Best Entertainment. Other winners included New York for Best Arts & Culture, Ancash for Best Adventure, and Paris for Best Shopping.

BELOW: A calligraphy-focused activation at The Beach, the activity and leisure zone at the TOURISE Summit

IMAGES COURTESY OF TOURISE; ELBANCO, CHRISTIAN VINCES, STOCKBYM/ADOBE STOCKS

Frameworks for the future

As the tourism landscape continues to evolve, attention is already turning to next year's edition. If the first summit signalled anything, it is that TOURISE is poised to become one of the most influential gatherings on the global tourism calendar – not only for what happens on stage, but for the momentum it sets in motion long after the event concludes. For industry leaders, policymakers, investors, and innovators, this is the platform that will increasingly shape the world's understanding of where tourism is headed.

TOURISE's impact was not confined to the three days of the summit. The event was designed to function as a year-round platform, and the partnerships initiated in Riyadh are expected to continue maturing over the coming months. Many of the deals, pilots, and frameworks discussed there will unfold throughout the year – influencing investment pipelines, shaping destination strategies, and accelerating cross-border innovation. **BT**

Lessons in Luxury

WORDS **YI-HWA HANNA**

From its widely beloved business class to its multi-award-winning first, Emirates' premium offerings are often referred to as a hotel in the sky — and the carrier's new training centre is ready to keep raising the bar

Flying first class is an experience that many people dream of experiencing at least once in their lifetime. While the primary purpose for most people travelling by plane is still about getting from point A to B, since the early days of commercial flight, air travel has long been associated with luxury. More people are flying by plane now than ever before, with global air passenger traffic reaching record highs. And for the segment of society that flies first class, the choice is made not just for the increased comfort and convenience – it's all about the quality of the experience. Yet while a number of major international airlines are scaling back their first class offering – including Thai Airways, which announced in September that it would be phasing it out over the next two to three years in favour of an improved business class, and American Airlines, which has also been phasing out its premium first class in recent years – Emirates isn't just holding strong with one of the top offerings across the globe, it's even doubling down on elevating its service to that level across the board.

ABOVE: Emirates serves some of the world's most premium Ossetra caviar in its first class

In early October, the UAE carrier opened a major new world-class facility in Dubai: The Centre of Hospitality Excellence. The centre, which cost US$8 million to build, aims to be the ultimate training ground for its almost 25,000-strong cabin crew. Here, the focus is to elevate beyond the safety procedures, command skills, and other practical learning they're given in Emirates' other training centres by teaching them the art of hospitality excellence. The crew who pass through its doors will learn and perfect every aspect of what it takes to provide Emirates' "7-star" service standards, wherein each aircraft cabin – and particularly its premium offerings – is treated like a luxury hotel in the sky.

Inside the glossy new centre is an expansive restaurant and lounge that can seat up to 170 guests, as well as eight classrooms enabled with modern technology. There, staff will be able to learn everything from the tenets of fine dining and related beverage pairings, to how best to engage with premium passengers. Crew being trained here will learn that tableware must be presented with the logo placed just-so; that the cutlery should be a specific distance from the plate;

IMAGES SUPPLIED

TOP: The large restaurant and lounge area in the new Emirates Centre of Hospitality Excellence

LEFT: Dining setup on board an Emirates first class cabin

what a perfect napkin fold should look like; how sauces should be poured just-so. In many ways, it feels like attending hotel school – and that was part of the intention. After all, Emirates partnered with one of the world's leading hospitality schools, Switzerland's Ecole Hôtelière de Lausanne back in 2020, as an investment into raising their standards to Michelin-worthy levels. But the centre isn't just about training their staff to be able to provide it for guests – it's also intended to allow each and every one of them to experience what it feels like to enjoy that service themselves.

A TASTE FOR AUTHENTIC LUXURY

Thomas Ney, Emirates' Divisional Senior Vice President of Service Delivery, is passionate about the fact that in order to know how business and first class guests will feel, the crew must have been on the receiving end of that level of service too, to truly know the difference. When *Business Traveller Middle East* got a first-look tour at the facility upon its opening, Ney explained that this enables each crew member to genuinely relate to the customers they serve, helping them not only create a more memorable experience for the guest, but also find new joys through their work. Indeed, the educational aspect makes it easy to take pride in each task: by the time training is through, each crew member won't just understand the difference between various bubbles brands, the might of each vintage, the history of each house, and how to pronounce every name perfectly. They'll also know where the best caviar comes from, and the difference between the tastes of Siberian sturgeon and how that stacks up against, say, Beluga. They will know how it tastes when paired with blinis versus sour cream, egg yolks, or chives, why it is served with a chilled mother-of-pearl spoon, and how each option of bubbles can bring out a different nuance in its flavour. They will have practiced plating elegant desserts within a matter of minutes, so that a customer never feels short-changed over the sense of luxury even when they're dining amidst impeccably-timed flight schedules – and how to ensure each dish and drink is given the same attention to detail as the most outstanding fine dining restaurants, even at 40,000 feet. They will have examined every inch of the fully-functional Emirates Airbus A350 simulator, where they will have had hands-on training in serving these gourmet meals across each cabin. They'll also learn a range of soft skills essential for providing the seamless, top-notch, and personal service customers have come to expect from Emirates – including emotional intelligence, attentiveness, self-awareness, and empathy – by practicing with their peers. Each crew member that completes the training will graduate with savoir-être: the art of simply knowing how to be.

> “Staff learn the tenets of fine dining, and how best to engage with premium guests”

More than 10,000 Emirates cabin crew will be trained in the new facility by the end of this year, and in many ways, it won't just be teaching them key skills for their job with the airline – they'll also gain growth for their life and careers beyond it. Ney proudly said that he expects that anyone who has trained with Emirates at this level would be able to easily step into a hospitality role at a five-star hotel. The charming staff we met there on the day told us, with a clear sense of contentment, that it's now impossible for them to host a dinner party at their home without their deep hospitality knowledge seeping in. When they're doing their job right, the average guest won't have any idea just how much work, care, and dedication has gone into ensuring every moment of their experience will uphold the promise made with their ticket price. But for those in the know, it certainly creates a whole new level of respect and appreciation for what goes into creating an experience that is truly premium. **BT**

SPEED, STRATEGY

IMAGES **ADAM FUSSEL**

AND SCHMOOZING

HOW FORMULA 1 HOSPITALITY IS UPPING ITS GAME AND THE CORPORATE LESSONS TO BE FOUND IN THE PIT LANE

WORDS **TAMARA HINSON**

IT'S

Saturday evening at Silverstone after a thrilling day of qualifying, with speed machines sliding around a rain-soaked circuit. Outside the Aston Martin Aramco F1 team's campus, Fernando Alonso takes to the stage of "The Lawn" to greet a select group of hospitality guests. Armed with a T-shirt gun, he fires merchandise into the crowd. Meanwhile, people clamour to pose in front of a replica pit wall, visit the bar, and head to another souvenir station to grab shirts adorned with a cartoon-like image of themselves as a racing driver.

The annual gathering is an invite-only affair for a handful of lucky guests, including race fans and corporate partners. It's also a reminder that F1 is no longer just about the on-track action – it's big business.

For hardcore race fans, the paddock is the place to be, lined with the F1 teams' motorhomes and likely sightings of drivers and team principals. But for others, the Paddock Club – that coveted complex stuffed with the hospitality suites operated by F1 teams and sponsors – is the promised land. Offerings here have never been more spectacular. At the Silverstone Grand Prix this year, for example, Qatar Airways set up a barbershop for those who fancied a quick pre-race trim.

But in the fast-paced world of F1, teams and partners can't rest on their laurels when it comes to hospitality. Proof of this is Atlassian Williams Racing's stunning new Paddock Club suite. Open exclusively to guests invited by the team or its partners, it feels airier and more spacious than neighbouring suites. Key features include a large central bar, positioned to provide great views over both the track and suite, and the customisation station, where guests can have their initials embossed onto the Carl Friedrik wallets holding their tickets, or onto luggage tags they'll be gifted.

FROM TOP: Red Bull cars in the pit lane; Lewis Hamilton at House 44 at The Paddock Club

Marcus Prosser, director of marketing at Atlassian Williams Racing, says it's an approach that reflects a growing demand for more meaningful experiences. "We've witnessed a significant evolution in what clients seek from sporting hospitality experiences," says Prosser. "Gone are the days when a good view and a glass of Champagne was enough. The hospitality landscape is shifting from a one-size-fits-all approach to meaningful, personalised experiences."

It's an approach that's being embraced across the board. "Increasingly, guests want to feel part of the team – they want immersive experiences behind the scenes, access to our drivers and team ambassadors," says Kate Smithson, chief of partnerships at Aston Martin Aramco F1 team. "They want to be closer to the action, with increased access to racing experiences such as simulators."

ON HOME TURF

Another exciting new offering is House 44. This swanky new Paddock Club suite, launched at the Silverstone GP, is a collaboration between Lewis Hamilton, F1, and Soho House.

"The House 44 suite is an amazing, elevated way of experiencing a Formula 1 race weekend," said Hamilton. "Working closely with Soho House and F1, I wanted us to design a space I'd choose for myself if I wasn't on track. Knowing the high expectations of this audience, we focused on getting every detail right, from the interiors to the off-track moments. I think we've curated the ultimate aspirational experience – somewhere that everyone is going to want to be come race week."

House 44 has been at or will appear at various races (including the Italy, Mexico, Las Vegas, and UAE GPs in 2025). At Silverstone, it resembled a luxurious living room – rustic wooden tables topped with chess boards and coffee table books honouring everything from famous racing drivers to the Black Dandy movement. Alongside free-flowing bubbles there were signature drinks, including virgin versions made with Almave – a zero-proof agave spirit brand founded by Hamilton. Guests can sign up for pit walks, and there will be regular appearances from the legend himself. It's one of the smaller Paddock Club suites,

IMAGES **ADAM FUSSEL; DEAN MOUHTAROPOULOS/FORMULA 1/GETTY IMAGES**

but feels decidedly exclusive – as it should, considering tickets start at AED42,743.

Somewhat surprisingly, House 44 did not appear at the Singapore GP in October – the calendar's first night race. But then again, perhaps the competition was too stiff. The Singapore GP has always been known for the wide range of hospitality suites and after-parties. In 2025, new hospitality offerings included OBSERV@3, where fans feasted on cuisine prepared by chefs from Claudine, one of Singapore's top fine dining restaurants, as well as the Driver's Right Lounge on the fourth floor of the Esplanade – Theatres on the Bay venue, complete with an open-air terrace with views of Turns 13, 14, 15 and 16.

Over in the US, it shouldn't come as any surprise that Las Vegas has some of the most spectacular hospitality offerings. These include the Gordon Ramsay at F1® Garage (from AED96,409 for a three-day ticket), which, aside from chef-curated cuisine, includes behind-the-scenes experiences and access to the F1 Podium Celebration among other perks. The Skybox suite, meanwhile, is located above the Heineken Silver Main Grandstand, and its proximity to the Heineken Silver Stage is a major draw – it's the setting for driver appearances. For those interested, three-day tickets start from AED31,530.

In the Middle East, the Abu Dhabi GP's '360 at Sixteen' hospitality area, launching this December, will offer fantastic views of the finishing straight. The multi-level lounge will feature garden-inspired areas and terraces overlooking the pit lane, plus perks for guests such as pit walks and complimentary access to the Louvre Abu Dhabi. Guests can also make pit stops at live cooking stations or food trucks, though alcoholic drinks aren't included in the price – AED5.785 for a four-day ticket.

FORMULA FOR SUCCESS

One of the reasons race fans happily fork out huge sums of cash for hospitality suites or after-parties is the chance to

TOP F1 HOSPITALITY EXPERIENCES

ATLASSIAN WILLIAMS RACING'S F1 PADDOCK CLUB SUITE

Signature features of this new suite include top-notch food and drinks, a large central bar and a central stage. The latter will be the setting for appearances by team members, including drivers and mechanics. Prices vary depending on race.

OBSERV@3, SINGAPORE

Located near the circuit's Turn 3, OBSERV@3 offers cuisine prepared by executive chef Julien Mercier from fine dining spot Claudine. While you're at the GP, check out Twenty3 too, a multi-level trackside retreat with multiple vantage points. Three-day OBSERV@3 tickets start from AED26,218. ***singaporegp.sg***

SKYBOX, LAS VEGAS

Hospitality suites at this year's Las Vegas GP (20-22 November) included Skybox, where guests could feast on gourmet cuisine and sip cocktails prepared by the city's top mixologists. Tickets also included a Heineken Silver Main Grandstand seat. Three-day Skybox tickets started from AED31,482. ***f1lasvegasgp.com***

360 AT SIXTEEN, ABU DHABI

Abu Dhabi GP's new hospitality area, which will launch this December, benefits from a prime position – it will be located at Turn 16, which means brilliant views of the finishing straight, alongside DJ sets, garden vibes and firework moments. Four-day 360 at Sixteen tickets start from AED5,785. ***abudhabigp.com***

IMAGES **WILLIAMS F1; SINGAPORE GP PTE LTD; LAS VEGAS GRAND PRIX, INC; ETHARA**

THE LAWN
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glimpse behind the scenes and hear from the people who have shaped the sport. We're not just talking about drivers – but the strategists and engineers toiling away in the garages and on the pit wall. Often, the guest speakers generating the most excitement are members of the pit crew.

A growing number of companies are also tapping into the knowledge garnered by these motoring geniuses. Countless former strategists, engineers and mechanics now make a living as motivational speakers, teaching businesses and their employees how great communication, teamwork, and strategy can reap huge rewards.

It's a topic that features heavily in David Coulthard's book, *The Winning Formula*, in which he writes extensively about how his life as an F1 driver sparked an obsession with marginal gains – incremental tweaks to various aspects of performance – and helped him succeed as a businessman, too.

Mario Isola, head of motorsport at Pirelli (F1's sole tyre supplier) is a firm believer that almost everyone can learn from F1 – and motorsport in general. "Motorsport is a great training ground," he says. "At Pirelli, we use it to train people across various departments, whether it's teaching them about logistics or supply chains. In motorsport, you can't have a single delay because it could affect a championship."

Former Aston Martin Aramco F1 strategist-turned-Sky Sports correspondent Bernie Collins now spends much of her time explaining to companies what they can learn from the way aspects such as data-driven performance and risk management have shaped her sport.

'F1 highlights people's ability to make decisions very quickly'

FROM TOP: Aston Martin Aramco Lawn event; the Abu Dhabi Grand Prix race track

"Many – if not all – of the skills are transferable in some way," she points out. "At Aston Martin Aramco, we had multiple employees working across multiple sites and time zones, all operating in high pressure situations. Clear and concise communication became very important. F1 highlights people's ability to make decisions very quickly, and much of this quick decision-making comes from excellent preparation. We would continuously ask 'What would we do now if this happened?'"

Sharing a common goal – and knowing how to achieve it – is equally important, says Bernie. "Two aspects which enable great teamwork are having trust and a common singular goal. Often in business the goal isn't clear – is it a better product or greater profit? In F1, the goal is to go faster every week, and everyone works hard to achieve that. Think of a pit stop – there is trust that the driver stops on the marks and that each mechanic follows the correct procedure, in the correct order. Otherwise, we'd never have achieved sub-two-second pits-stops, and the trust is built through constant honest analysis after each event."

In F1, every second counts – and increasingly, every experience does too. That's a formula any business would do well to follow **BT**

IMAGES **SAM CHURCHILL FOR ASTON MARTIN ARAMCO FORMULA ONE (TM) TEAM; JORGE FERRARI**

WORDS **YI-HWA HANNA**

LIVING HISTORY

Switzerland's pioneering Bürgenstock Resort has long mastered the art of allure: first with Hollywood glamour, and then with a world-class spa. It now stands as a living museum of Swiss hospitality — reimagined for a new era of sustainability and ultra-refined escapism

ABOVE: The stunning Bürgenstock Alpine Spa at Bürgenstock Resort Lake Lucerne

IMAGES **BÜRGENSTOCK HOTELS AG**

The year is 1954. High atop a mountain overlooking Switzerland's Lake Lucerne, the proprietor of the Bürgenstock Resort, Fritz Frey, has opened a new outdoor attraction: the Hollywood Pool. Inspired by his visits to California in the USA, he has sought to bring a modern, glamorous, and celebrity-focused atmosphere to the property, hoping that it would help to attract the new era of international travellers and a host of celebrities who were part of his network. Fritz was the son of Friedrich Frey-Fürst, an entrepreneur, art collector, and merchant who had taken over ownership of the illustrious resort from its original founder, Franz Josef Bucher. And his instincts, as it turns out, were spot-on: the pool quickly became a magnet for the very types of guests Fritz craved throughout the 1950s and 1960s, even welcoming none other than Sean Connery and the entire cast and crew of the James Bond film *Goldfinger,* as they lived at the resort's Palace Hotel during filming in 1964. The movie's opening scenes were even filmed there, although within the fictional world of 007, they were used as a double for Miami.

Over the years, the Bürgenstock Resort has gained plenty more star-studded appeal beyond its Hollywood Pool. Film and fashion icon Audrey Hepburn and her actor-director husband Mel Ferrer got married at the Bürgenstock Chapel in 1954. In the 1960s, the Hollywood Golden Age movie star Sophia Loren and her film producer husband Carlo Ponti lived in a villa on the Bürgenstock grounds for seven years while they sought a more peaceful life free from the daily chase of the paparazzi. Former Prime Minister of India Indira Gandhi holidayed there with her father Jawaharlal Nehru when she was a young woman, and the resort has welcomed a large number of politicians and members of the monarchy from across the globe, including Jimmy Carter, Henry Kissinger, and Queen Ingrid of Denmark.

The resort's success has never just been in its appeal to famous faces – it was, in large part, because of the enterprising spirit of its various owners through the years. Its founders, Franz Josef Bucher and Josef Durrer, had begun the hotel development after purchasing the Alp Tritt farmland on the Bürgenberg – which the property was named after – in 1871. By 1873, they had opened a hotel there, followed by a hydroelectric plant in 1888, to power a funicular that could transport people from Lake Lucerne to their hotels and back. It was the first electric cable car in Switzerland, and it also carried water from Lake Lucerne to the resort for its drinking needs. The chapel followed, along with a number of villas used as further hotel buildings, and the revolutionary Hammetschwand Lift. In 1928, then-owner Friedrich Frey-Fürst opened the Bürgenstock Alpine Golf Club there, and the following year, the Kehrsiten Lido was opened to the public nearby. And 30 years after the famous Hollywood Pool had been opened, the resort introduced the Bürgenstock Club, with a restaurant, bar, spa, and indoor swimming pool. Through all of these developments ran a common thread: the idea to draw more people in by offering them not just a hotel but an entire resort area – a place to head to for rest and recreation, with extensive facilities specifically built and designed to better cater to that.

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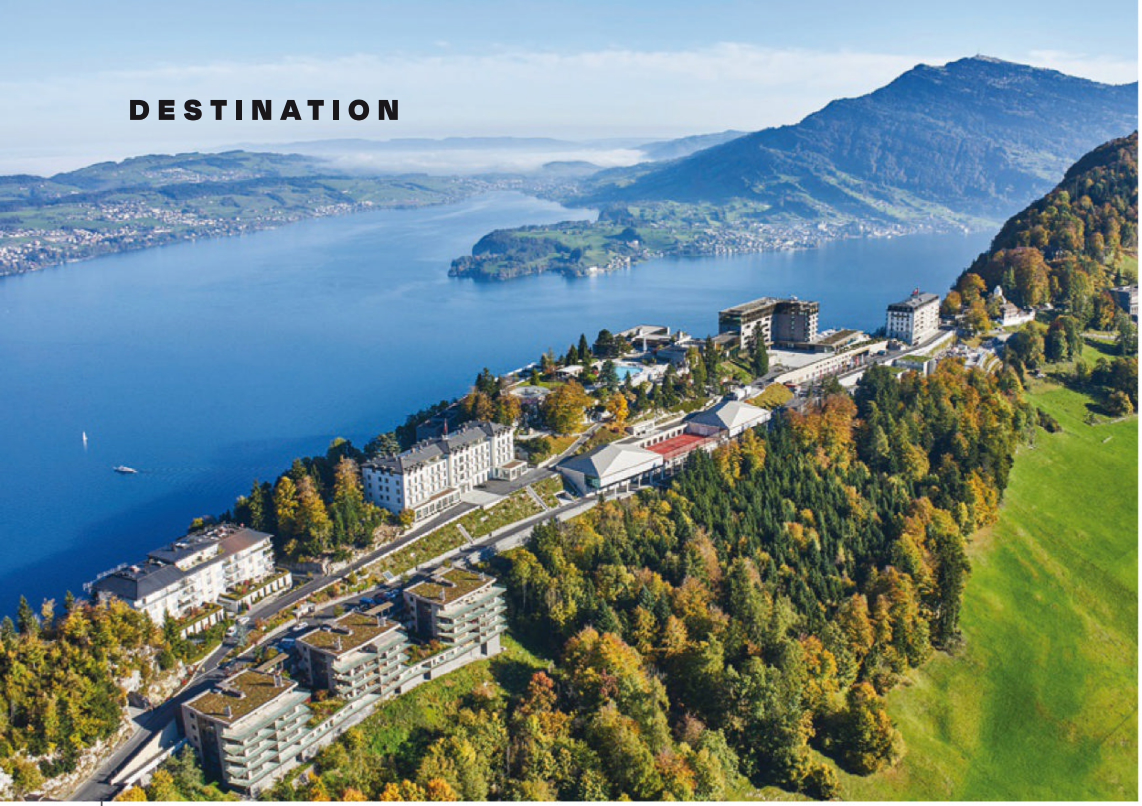
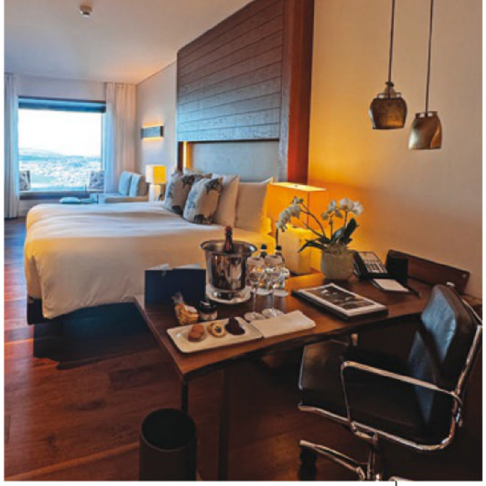
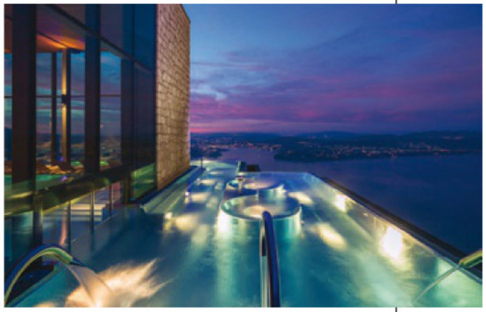






→ The Hammetschwand Lift, for instance, was the first of its kind in Switzerland when it opened in 1905. 'Paris has its Eiffel Tower, so the Swiss will have the Hammetschwand Lift,' thought Bucher and his team – a collection of the best Swiss engineers, including renowned bridge builders, lift company experts, and pioneering builders and engineers. To this day, with the constant renovation and development of the facilities over the years, the high-tech installation is still the fastest exterior lift in Europe. It wasn't just the lift that appealed to tourists, but the walk leading there from the resort, too. Many famous guests have enjoyed walking the beautiful cliffside path from the Bürgenstock Resort to the Hammetschwand Lift, from comic actor Charlie Chaplin to former chancellor of Germany Konrad Adenauer. French statesman Louis Barthou is even quoted as having described it as the most beautiful high-level walk in the world. If you visit the resort today, you can follow that same path – its jaw-dropping views and crisp mountain air begin from the central area of the resort just past the chapel, and you'll reach the lift within 30-odd minutes. Once inside the elevator, the ascent only takes a minute, and at the top, you're rewarded with views so postcard-perfect they hardly look real.

A Sustainable Legacy

The rolling green farmland beyond the lift doesn't just offer views to the Bürgenstock Resort – they now also provide a number of materials and locally-sourced produce used throughout the property. The resort's own Bürgenstock Cheese is produced by a local cheesemaker using milk from cows grazing just 500m away. A variety of other local cheeses, butter, and milk on offer at its restaurants are also sourced from a nearby farmer. Some of its meat comes from local butchers, and from the road just in front of its biggest hotel building, The Contemporary, you can see a beehive where the resort's own honey is produced by local beekeepers.

While the resort has always had a sustainable sensibility to it – one that began with the founders' hydroelectric plant to power the funicular that still ferries guests between Lucerne and the hotels today – the honey intiative is part of the resort's current commitment to sustainability. In 2025, 100% of the resort's cooling needs and 80% of its heating is provided by a unique energy system powered by the local lake water. When the current owners – Qatar's Katara Hospitality – relaunched the resort after a 10-year refurbishment, they were inspired by the pioneering mindset of its founders, and have taken great care to honour and continue their sustainability-minded legacy. The resort's electricity is 100% CO2-neutral certified and is distributed from a regional station in the Canton of Nidwalden. Even its physical restoration, carried out from 2007 to 2017, after it was taken over by Katara Hospitality from its previous proprieter, Frey Holding, painstakingly upheld this love and respect for its history, retaining as much excavated material from the historic 1928 golf course as possible in the construction of its newer facilities. As you stroll around the expansive grounds, you may come across a some local wildlife that thrives through carefully-preserved habitats and special pathways built to integrate their natural crossings in the area. If you're lucky, you may even catch a glimpse of a family of deer that enjoys watching the funicular travel down the mountain as you make your way from the resort towards Lake Lucerne.

Bürgenstock's New Era

While the resort has had a series of different owners through the years, its purchase by Katara Hospitality in 2007 was its biggest change, switching hands from a former line of European owners to a subsidiary of the Qatar Investment Company. The move came as Katara continued its ongoing mission to expand its portfolio of luxury properties around the world. Bürgenstock Resort Lake Lucerne's reopening was the third

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: A bird's eye view of Bürgenstock Resort Lake Lucerne; A room at The Contemporary building of the resort; The outdoor spa pool; The MS Bürgenstock Catamaran

IMAGES BÜRGENSTOCK HOTELS AG; YI-HWA HANNA

ABOVE LEFT: The Bürgenstock funicular at Bürgenstock Hotel & Alpine Spa - The Contemporary

ABOVE RIGHT: The Hammetschwand Lift

IMAGES **BÜRGENSTOCK HOTELS AG; MICHAEL REINHARD/GETTY IMAGES**

project to happen under The Bürgenstock Collection, a selection of luxurious hotels in Switzerland owned by Katara that also includes the Hotel Schweizerhof Bern & THE SPA and the Royal Savoy Hotel & Spa Lausanne. A key part of Katara's mission isn't just to expand, however – the company is also committed to preserving the heritage of iconic hotels around the world. As His Excellency Sheikh Nawaf Bin Jassim Bin Jabor Al-Thani, chairman of Katara Hospitality, said during the hotel's reopening, Bürgenstock Resort Lake Lucerne was a chance to "[revive] the property's prestigious past while marking a new step forward in the region's long tradition of hospitality. " He added: "Katara Hospitality is globally renowned for creating landmark hospitality gems that enhance the tourism landscape in the markets we operate, and such a momentous occasion further illustrates our continued success within the global luxury tourism sector." Indeed, every inch of the property today pays homage to its rich history, and its epitomisation of Swiss luxury hospitality, with care and respect – while also showcasing elements of its new ownership through seamless, subtle touches, such as a plate of dates alongside macarons in a guest room's welcome platter, or a table of Arabic handicrafts found next to the gourmet Swiss goods in the on-site gift shop.

A World-Renowned Leisure Escape

In the age of social media, the Bürgenstock Resort Lake Lucerne has found a new star quality through the highly-Instagrammable appeal of its spa pool: an expansive outdoor thermal bath that offers unbeatable views over lake Lucerne. The pool is just one part of the The Bürgenstock Alpine Spa, a multi-award-winning 10,000sqm spa facility with five pools, multiple saunas and steam rooms, and various hydrotherapy experiences, plus a wide range of treatments utilising cutting-edge products and technology, including massages, facials, body treatments, beauty services, and fitness and yoga activities. The outdoor thermal bath has become such an iconic place to see and be seen that come photo-friendly hours – the resort restricts photography times to certain hours of the day, to protect the peace and privacy of its less snap-happy guests – it's nearly impossible to resist the allure of grabbing your smartphone for 'the shot'. With a sweeping view of the lake surrounded by fog-covered mountains, a blanket of trees in every shade of green, and the unique experience of the heated pool's steam rising into the clouds even on the chilliest days, it's hard to blame anyone giving into the temptation. Just don't forget to put the gear away and switch off as you take advantage of the rest of the spa: the facility is so good at helping you relax that it helped the property win three Michelin Keys in the inaugural Michelin Wellness Awards earlier this year.

When you're done with the wellness facilities, there are plenty of other irresistible ways to give into the resort's R&R offerings. At its in-house cinema – a fully-equipped luxury cinema with reclining leather seats – you'll find free popcorn, and a new or classic film showing each night. Just 500m down the mountain, you can hop off the funicular and onto the modern MS Bürgenstock Catamaran across Lake Lucerne for a day of exploring its beautiful Old Town, with its wealth of preserved medieval architecture. Dining is an adventure, with 12 venues to choose from including restaurants, bars and lounges, serving cuisine from traditional Swiss to fine dining, steaks, East Asian, Persian, and more – some of which have been recognised by the Michelin guide and Gault&Millau for their excellence. Shop for handicrafts, perfumes, and fashion finds in the SkyBoutique or the on-premise Shopping Arcade. Take a hike in the local area. You can even book in for a helicopter flight over the Alps, to be followed by a chef-served authentic Swiss Raclette accompanied by gourmet charcuterie and bubbles. The hotel also has a first-class conference centre with 31 meeting rooms, ballrooms, and a central open-air area that can be completely covered to host up to 600 people. In 2024, an event held here made history as the resort hosted leaders from 93 different countries for the Summit on Peace in Ukraine.

Come evening, the resort's Contemporary residence has 383 rooms and suites with plush bedding, modern amenities, and time-honoured luxury design features for you to sink into. In each space, you'll find a working fireplace to cosy up next to, plus windows offering panoramic views – from both the living area and the enormous bathtub. In the Waldhotel and Palace Hotel accommodation, both also part of the resort, you'll find 137 rooms focused on wellness and nature, or 108 historic rooms and suites that have lovingly restored many of the original Belle Époque elements from its 100+year history. No matter how you build your stay, a visit to the Bürgenstock Resort Lake Lucerne won't just be a holiday, but a chance to be a part of living history. **BT**

Built on empathy

A chocolate maker's legacy reborn through sustainable Swiss architecture

ZURICH-BASED FIRM TOWNSET GmbH took on the task of developing multi-storey residential buildings on the site of chocolate manufacturer, Felchlin. Led by architect and urban planner, Ihab Morgan, this project commenced in 2018 in the Swiss canton capital of Schwyz. The challenge was to combine the traces of a once grand industrial past with the demands of contemporary living.

In Central Switzerland, chocolate has long been produced on an industrial scale. Traditional company Felchlin is renowned not only for its pralines and couvertures but also for its distinctive, representative architecture.

For more than a century, Felchlin has had its headquarters in Schwyz. Like many industrial families, the Felchlins built a villa with a park which, for decades, housed company offices. Following an internal restructuring, the firm moved to a new headquarters, leaving behind a space ripe for residential development.

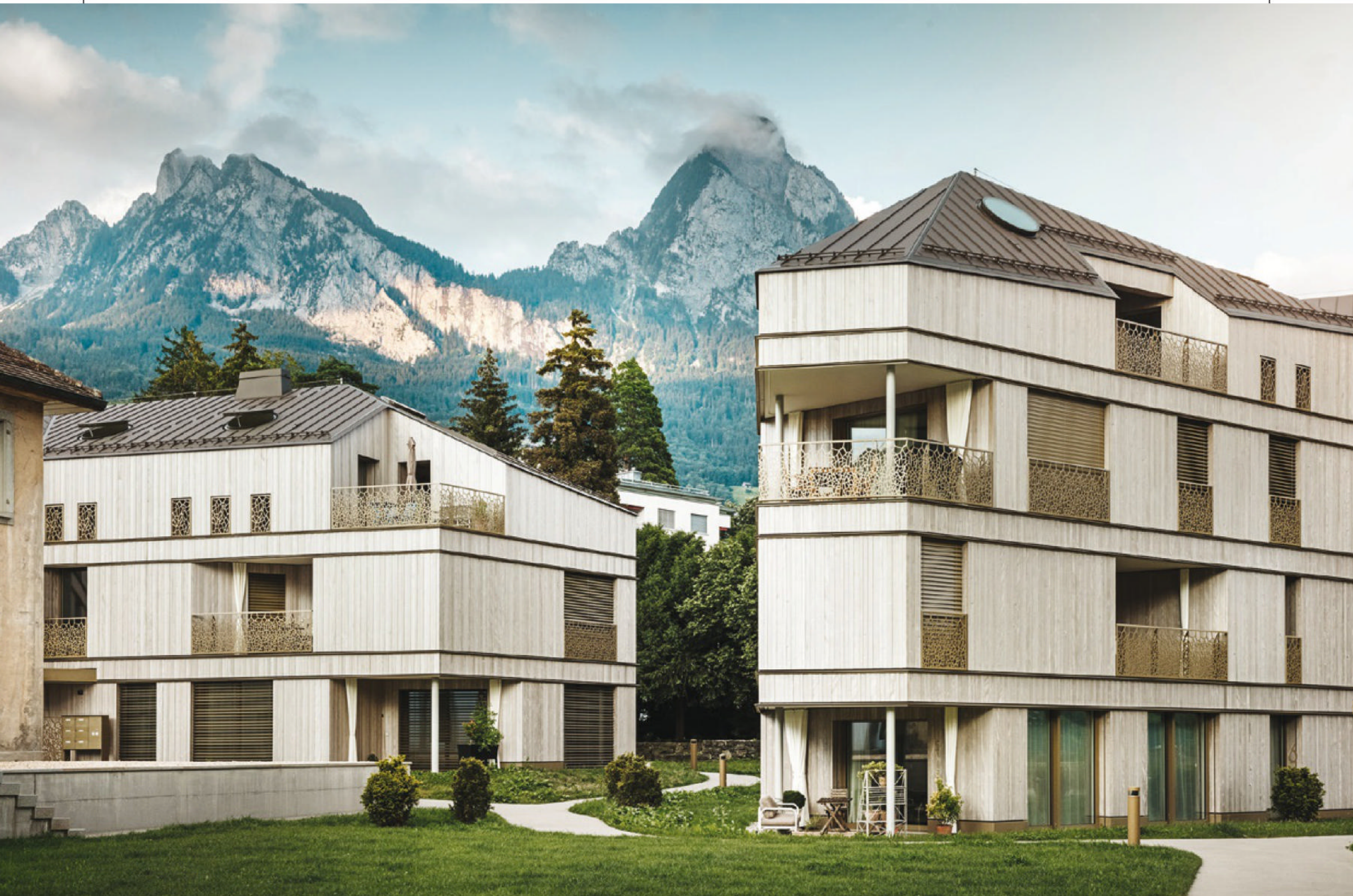
FROM TOP: Ihab Morgan, architect and urban planner of the Liebwylen Project; Townset's multi-storey buildings

WHAT IS LIEBWYLEN?

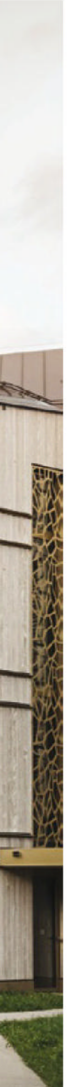
Morgan was commissioned directly by investors and planning for the 44-million-Swiss-franc project began. By the end of 2023, more than 7,600 square metres of usable space were completed. The Liebwylen Project received the "Architecture and Urban Planning" award at the German Design Council in 2021 and, last summer, it was nominated as a finalist for the World Architecture Festival 2024 in Singapore.

WHO IS IHAB MORGAN?

Despite having worked on large-scale developments, Morgan chose the comparatively modest Liebwylen



FROM TOP: Incorporating natural textures into the buildings; laser-cut stair railings inside the premises



> “If you compromise too much, the quality eventually crumbles”

project because he was fascinated by its setting, the historic Villa and the concept of high-quality living.

Morgan also valued the creative freedom he was granted. “In any construction project, no matter the aspect, you must always keep the overall impression in view,” says Morgan. “If you compromise too much, the quality eventually crumbles.”

For him, proactively engaging with authorities and neighbours was a given. His empathetic approach proved to be a masterstroke – he was able to identify and defuse potential conflicts before they escalated.

For instance, neighbours protested against the demolition of Felchlin Villa. Morgan agreed. He supported its conservation against the original plans and adapted his architecture to the resulting framework.

WHO WAS IT BUILT FOR?

Five multi-storey residential buildings were constructed in a circle around the existing villa. With 60% of the allowable building density utilised, the development still feels spacious and open. The 32 apartments – 18 of them maisonettes – range from 29 to 131 square metres.

LIVING WITH A VIEW

Morgan positioned the buildings to celebrate views of the mountains, the park and the historic villa. Morgan designed an L-shaped base typology, inspired by the scale and floor plan of the Felchlin Villa, rotating it according to its placement on the site.

He also adapted each structure individually to the slope, varying the number of stories.

“It would have been a shame to build ordinary apartment blocks beside the villa, in such a magnificent park and hillside setting,” Morgan explains. These floor plans generate unusual spatial experiences that encourage residents to design their living spaces minimally and consciously.

THE VISION

The original plans for the famed Liebwylen Project were drafted by TOWNSET founder, Ihab Morgan. Beyond that, he also acted as architect and urban planner of the entire project. With impressive international experience gained from major projects across Switzerland, Canada, the United States, and Germany, Morgan provides creative, solution-oriented thinking. In addition to his extensive practical experience and two academic degrees, he also holds a doctorate from ETH Zurich.

WHAT ABOUT THE ROOF?

The roofscape draws inspiration from the existing villa and the surrounding mountain silhouette, with construction tailored to withstand the alpine climate. The roofs are clad in standing-seam sheet metal, installed over a cross-laminated timber substructure.

The façades are crafted from simple yet exquisitely executed timber with sprayed cladding and clearly defined fire breaks. In harmony with the honey-toned façades, Morgan chose steel balcony and stair railings laser-cut with a pattern reminiscent of tree shadows.

Every construction detail – from materials and colours to the 45 circular skylights – was carefully modelled in 3D and coordinated with the client.

Morgan drew on his network of highly skilled planners, contractors and suppliers. What makes the difference? “For high-quality architecture,” he explains, “it’s crucial that all the companies involved work toward a shared goal and consistently assign their best-qualified people to the site.”

AND TOWNSET?

“Small core, big network,” says Morgan, describing his company TOWNSET GmbH. The firm offers services in project development, architecture and urban planning, as well as consulting in sustainability, smart cities and heritage conservation. TOWNSET operates with a strong project-based focus, activating specialist planners as needed. “We don’t do everything ourselves – that just wouldn’t be exciting enough.”

Transform your space
townset.com

WORDS **KATY GILLETT**

Turning The Tide

HOW TWO RED SEA PROPERTIES ARE CHANGING THE FACE OF LUXURY HOSPITALITY IN THE MIDDLE EAST

The Arab world's deep relationship with the night sky was the inspiration for Nujuma, a Ritz-Carlton Reserve, one of a handful of luxury five-star resorts currently open in Saudi Arabia's Red Sea. Nujum means "stars" in Arabic and the hotel's all-day dining restaurant Sita, meaning "six", is a cluster of pavilions at its centre, which staff affectionately refer to as Thurayya, or chandelier, the Arabic name for Pleiades, a bright cluster of stars that was historically used for navigation by nomads living in the desert.

It's details like this where Nujuma truly excels, adding a new layer to luxury hospitality through storytelling and paying homage to the rich culture of Saudi Arabia. It's one of the flagship properties in the country's Red Sea Project, which spans 28,000km along the kingdom's western coast, representing one of the world's most ambitious tourism developments. It's not only an exercise in indulgence, either; it's also described as "regenerative", since developers have made a genuine commitment to sustainability and environmental conservation.

REDEFINING BAREFOOT LUXURY

As my speedboat cuts through the turquoise waters of the Red Sea, skimming over coral reefs and past untouched islands, on my way to the resort, I begin to understand the scale of Saudi Arabia's tourism transformation. It's no longer simply about opening borders but rewriting the rules for ultra-luxury hospitality in the Middle East.

The kingdom's Vision 2030 to diversify its economy, including tourism efforts, has been much discussed, but experiencing its manifestation first-hand is something else entirely. Nujuma, together with its sister property The St Regis Red Sea Resort, a mere seven-minute boat ride away, are at the forefront of this shift, and a stay at both properties in one trip is a no-brainer.

I begin my three-day excursion at the former, a 63-key resort with shell-shaped beachfront and overwater villas reminiscent of what you might find in the Maldives. It's the Ritz-Carlton's first Reserve property in the Middle East, and it's clear why they chose this location for such a distinguished debut. It simply oozes exclusivity, from the privacy afforded by this well-laid-out island to the personalised service and the bespoke experiences you can book. The staff, many of whom live at sea full-time, are clearly as impressed by their home as they were when they first arrived.

ABOVE: A one-bedroom water villa's sundeck at Nujuma, a Ritz-Carlton Reserve

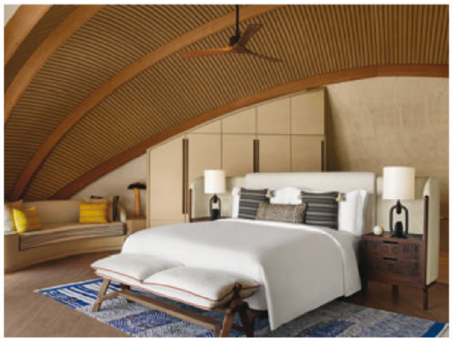
BOTTOM: St Regis Red Sea

The team members we meet, each one as friendly as the last, continuously reveal new stories or hidden messages about the property. For example, the island was once a favourite among fishermen and the old boat that sits on the beach by seafood restaurant Tabrah is one they formerly used to get to the mainland. Then there's the ceiling décor in Neyrah Spa, which was inspired by old-style fishermen's nets. The treatment room doors to the spa are meant to resemble honeycombs, inspired by the fact that the kingdom has a long-standing beekeeping tradition, particularly in the nearby regions.

At the resort's Conservation House, you can immerse yourself in these traditions even more through hands-on activities and workshops led by experts. The stargazing experience, for one, is a must-do. Mine is guided by astrophysicist Habib, who enthusiastically recounts Arab folktales about the stars, while educating us on the various visible constellations. Marine biologists also lead guests on underwater excursions where you can encounter species like the hawksbill turtle or schools or iridescent fish in coral gardens that have remained virtually untouched by human activity.

A NEW STANDARD EMERGES

If Nujuma represents the epitome of exclusivity, then The St Regis is polished sophistication. The property's 90 overwater and beachfront villas – brought to life by Japanese 'starchitect' Kengo Kuma – immediately signal this isn't your typical luxury resort. It's an architectural statement. The design seamlessly blends contemporary elegance with subtle nods to traditional Arabian aesthetics, from the geometric patterns that play with light and shadow to the courtyards that invite contemplation.



What distinguishes the brand is its legendary butler service, which has been reimagined for the setting. My butler wasn't just attentive; he was a curator of experiences, arranging everything from A to Z – and even ensuring the items we forgot at Nujuma were delivered to our door within hours of our arrival. The level of personalisation feels genuinely intuitive rather than scripted.

Once again, that sense of privacy stands out. It's a sprawling resort and at about 60% occupancy while I'm here, yet it still manages to feel like I have the whole place to myself, such is the meandering island layout that weaves through the villas, dining outlets, facilities, and beachfront.

ABOVE: A two-bedroom overwater villa at Nujuma

TOP LEFT: A three-bedroom at St Regis Red Sea

TOP RIGHT: A beach villa at Nujuma

THE BIGGER PICTURE

Beyond the obvious luxury and beauty, what makes these properties even more significant is what they represent for Saudi Arabia's hospitality sector. Both resorts are operated by Marriott, an international hotel group, and yet they feel authentically Arabian as opposed to generic imports. The staff, many of whom are Saudi nationals trained through the Red Sea Project's hospitality academy, bring genuine pride and local knowledge through their roles.

The resorts are also proving that ultra-luxury and environmental stewardship aren't mutually exclusive. The developer's mandate that 75% of islands remain in their natural state, combined with the commitment to renewable energy, as well as mangrove reforestation, marine conservation and animal protection efforts, set a new standard for the region.

As I depart, the boat gently bouncing over the waves as we speed past the stunning Ummahat archipelago, I see clearly how these properties are changing perceptions of Saudi Arabia as a luxury destination. They're not trying to replicate Dubai's maximalist approach or Abu Dhabi's cultural positioning. Instead, they're creating something unique: luxury that celebrates isolation, natural beauty and authentic cultural connection.

These aren't just hotels, but proof of concept for a more thoughtful, sustainable, and locally-rooted approach to luxury hospitality. And as Saudi Arabia continues opening up to international tourism, this pair of properties has set the bar incredibly high. **BT**

IMAGES **SUPPLIED**

PARTNER CONTENT

COFFEE PLANET

From Dubai to the World:
Over 20 Years of Coffee Planet

From a single coffee machine in 2005 to a regional powerhouse today, **Coffee Planet** celebrates two decades of blending tradition, innovation, and global ambition

MORE THAN TWO DECADES AGO, in 2005, Coffee Planet began with a single coffee machine and a bold dream - to bring world-class specialty coffee to the UAE. What started as a local experiment has since grown into one of the region's most respected roasting brands, combining global recognition with deep local roots

Now celebrating over 20 years of excellence, Coffee Planet reflects on a journey defined by vision, resilience, and innovation. At the heart of this success lies the partnership between chairman Allan Jones and his son, CEO William Jones - two leaders whose distinct yet complementary perspectives have shaped the brand's evolution.

Allan and co-founder Matthew Yorke Smith introduced specialty coffee to a market still discovering its appreciation for quality brews. What began with just 30 cups a day from a single machine inside a petrol station soon grew into something much greater. Today, the company operates a state-of-the-art roasting facility in Dubai, sourcing beans from over 23 origins worldwide, with coffees now reaching customers across the Middle East, Asia, and Europe.

"From those early days to now, the scale of what we've achieved is extraordinary," Allan reflects. "But what matters most is that we've remained true to our principles - Coffee Planet has always been a UAE brand with international ambition.

"We've always believed great coffee shouldn't be an exclusive luxury," Allan says. "Our goal has been to make specialty coffee accessible to everyone - and that belief has guided our innovation every step of the way." William adds, "For us, innovation doesn't mean ignoring tradition. It means celebrating the history of coffee while finding new ways to connect with today's and tomorrow's consumers.

"The way people experience coffee today is very different from 20 years ago," William explains. "Our customers are informed, adventurous, and expect more from their cup. My role is to ensure Coffee Planet continues to lead with innovation - whether that's through technology, sustainability, or creative new products."

From supplying hotels, restaurants, and retailers to opening its own cafés, Coffee Planet has evolved from a roaster into an experiential brand. Through its partner DASH Hospitality, it has opened 12 cafés across the UAE, offering customers a direct taste of its craftsmanship in spaces created for modern coffee culture.

Its regional expansion continues in Saudi Arabia, where Coffee Planet has partnered with HB Brands to establish a growing retail presence - including its fifth store in Riyadh's King Abdullah Financial District (KAFD).

After more than two decades of success, the Jones family remains focused on the future. For Allan, it's about legacy: "Crossing the 20-year mark proves that our foundations are strong. The next step is ensuring those values endure as we continue to expand." For William, the vision is growth and reinvention: "We want Coffee Planet to be more than a roaster. Our ambition is to shape how people experience coffee globally. That means pushing into new territories, exploring sustainability in deeper ways, and delivering experiences that surprise and delight."

Ultimately, Coffee Planet's story is about more than business - it's about family, perseverance, and shared vision. "At the heart of everything we've done is the fact that we are, and always will be, a family business. That's what makes Coffee Planet special," Allan concludes.

"Businesses that endure do so because they stay consistent with their values," Allan notes. "Quality and trust have kept us here for 20 years, and they'll keep us going for decades more."

IMAGES **SUPPLIED**

AIRLINE REVIEW

Singapore Airlines A350-900

HOTEL REVIEWS

Mandarin Oriental, Singapore + The Diamond Amsterdam

RESTAURANT REVIEW

Carbone Riyadh

Review

Putting business travel to the test

FLIGHT REVIEW

Singapore Airlines A350-900 business class

Singapore Airlines' daily flight from London Gatwick boasts spacious seats that make the long haul speed by, especially when combined with fine dining at altitude

IMAGE **SUPPLIED**

FLIGHT Review

WORDS
HANNAH BRANDLER

FINE FLYING Comfortable seats and gourmet food make for a luxury onboard experience

Background

Singapore Airlines launched flights from Gatwick to Singapore in June 2024, operated by its A350-900 aircraft. At the end of March, the route increased from five-times-weekly to daily.

SQ309 departs from Gatwick's North Terminal at 0925 and arrives at Changi T3 at 0615 the following morning. Singapore Airlines doesn't have a lounge at Gatwick — however, eligible passengers are granted access to the No1 Lounge.

The seat

As previously reviewed (find out more at businesstraveller.com/tried-and-tested) this business class is split across two cabins, with 42 lie-flat seats in a 1-2-1 configuration with direct aisle access.

Upholstered in plum-coloured leather, every seat is spacious, with plenty of storage, a power adaptor, two USB ports and an HDMI port, an 18-inch IFE monitor packed with entertainment content, plus complimentary (and reliable) wifi on multiple devices.

While there's no sliding door (yet), the winged shell makes it feel private. One downside is having to manually flip the seat over into a bed, but I found the seat comfortable.

New reusable amenity kits are by Le Labo, crafted from waxed cotton canvas. The contents are limited, but luxurious – hand cream, refreshing face mist and lip balm. Familiar items like dental kit, earplugs and eye mask are missing, however these can be requested or found in the lavatories.

The flight

The flight began with a personal welcome from the friendly staff and a glass of Piper-Heidsieck 2018 bubbles. Monica Galetti has created impressive menus for flights from London Heathrow, Gatwick and Manchester in premium cabins through her partnership with Singapore Airlines – and the menus are the kind that wouldn't look out of place in a fine dining restaurant. When we flew this route, we previewed dishes from the spring and summer menus – served until the end of May and August respectively. The summer appetiser was a colourful, refreshing heritage tomato and bresaola salad, dressed with bold verjus and black garlic emulsion and featuring a smoky undertone thanks to bacon salt. The spring highlight was a main of tender stone bass, dressed with tomato and cucumber salsa atop a silky cauliflower purée dotted with capers. Desserts ranged from a rhubarb cake with vanilla and ginger crème fraîche in spring, to a raspberry pistachio tartlet in summer. Galetti's autumn menu was served until the end of November 2025, and a winter menu will be introduced from this month.

> 'The impressive menus wouldn't look out of place in a fine dining restaurant'

Year-round, customers can select a European or Asian menu onboard ths flight, or pre-order a main course via the Book the Cook service up to 24 hours ahead of flying – all easily done via the Singapore Airlines app.

Breakfast was served around two hours before landing, with hot dishes or continental style (I was still stuffed, so opted for some fruit and a coffee). There are also snacks and lighter meals available throughout the flight.

Arrival

It's rather discombobulating when you arrive at Changi just shy of 6am, since you've skipped an entire night. Thankfully, I was en route to my hotel for a nap in no time, thanks to the speedy eGates at immigration. **BT**

VERDICT

Singapore Airlines continues to offer an excellent business class product, with friendly service and spacious seats that make long-haul flights speed by – particularly when you're kept busy with fine dining at altitude. We look forward to testing out the new business class in 2026.

FACTS

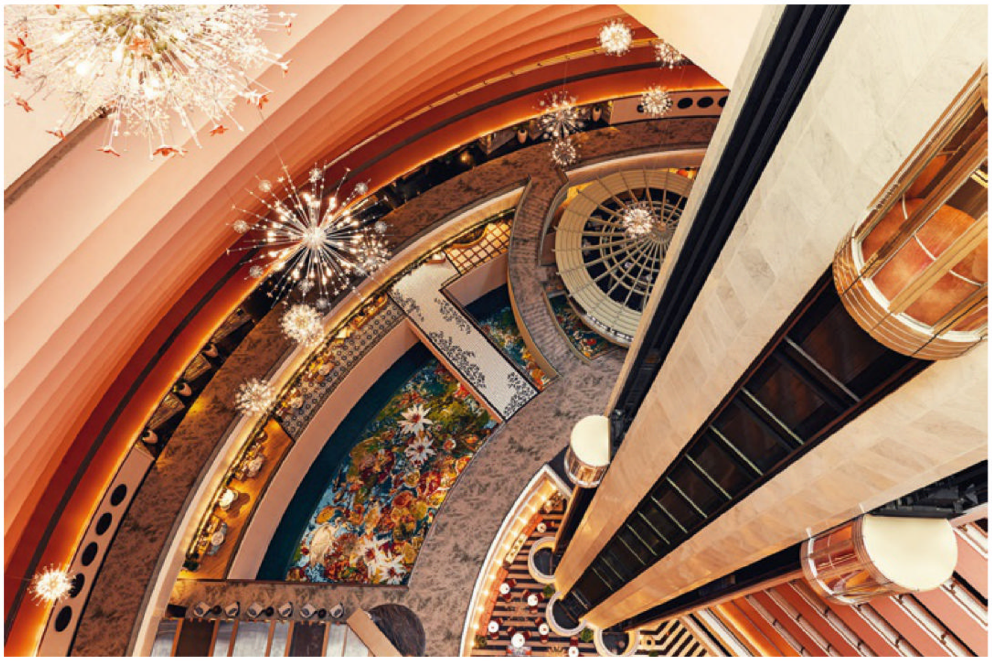
FLIGHT DURATION 12 hours 50 minutes
SEAT WIDTH 28 inches
BED LENGTH 79 inches fully-flat
PRICE Return business class fare from Gatwick to Singapore starts from £3,984.
CONTACT singaporeair.com

GOOD-TO-KNOW

A SGD1.1 billion multi-year retrofit programme will see new business class seats across SIA's A350-900 long-haul and ultra long-range (ULR) aircraft by 2027.

IMAGES COURTESY OF SINGAPORE AIRLINES

WORDS
HANNAH BRANDLER



Mandarin Oriental, Singapore

The luxury hotel showcases a refreshing refurbishment in Marina Bay

What's it like?
Mandarin Oriental is no newcomer to Singapore, with its presence in Marina Bay dating back to 1987.

In 2023, however, it closed for a six-month Singaporean-themed renovation by DesignWilkes – swapping a dark moody look for bright, contemporary floral interiors. Step inside and you're greeted by beautiful orchid arrangements (the city-state's national flower), plus a tropical mural behind reception.

The soaring atrium by architect John Portman gives futuristic *Bladerunner*-meets-Guggenheim vibes as you peer up at the fan-shaped ceiling – a nod to the brand's unmistakeable symbol.

A glass lift provides a zippy tour of 23 gallery-like floors – each boasting a striking collection of artworks. On the way down, you're treated to views of a stunning hand-woven lily pond carpet.

Rooms
The hotel's 510 rooms, including 42 suites, have floor-to-ceiling windows with three view options. Rooms facing the bay have a blue colour palette and batik patterned walls, while city-facing rooms are bathed in green, and those overlooking the sea have a sunset-inspired orange hue.

All boast marble-clad bathrooms, Peranakan-style, dark-wood-carved cabinets, Diptyque toiletries and high-tech fittings – from automatic blackout blinds to WhatsApp customer service. Opt for a Club room or suite for lounge perks.

Thoughtful touches include an MO-branded bookmark, sleep-boosting tea, and a glasses cloth for spectacled guests at turn-down.

GOOD-TO-KNOW

HAUS 65 guests get complimentary drop-off within 2km of the hotel in a chauffeur-driven electric Porsche.

Facilities
Ten restaurants and bars range from buffet dining to Cantonese, Japanese, Italian, and American cuisines.

The tropical all-day embu offers 11 buffet stations – from Singaporean laksa to sushi, Indian curries plus Western fare. Our tip: dine beneath the Supertree-inspired installations.

I spent most of my time in HAUS 65 – the 21st floor lounge reserved for Club guests. While it boasts skyline views, you'll instead be drawn to the eclectic interiors, which resemble an art collector's apartment. Expect yellow lacquer cabinets, batik wall hangings, plush sofas and a fascinating curation of artworks and artefacts. Here, guests can enjoy complimentary breakfast, afternoon tea and evening cocktails with hors d'oeuvres.

Leisure highlights include a spa, fitness centre, yoga patio, and outdoor swimming pool overlooking Marina Bay. Event spaces, meanwhile, range from a 600 sqm pillarless ballroom to 16 meeting rooms. **BT**

VERDICT

A masterful renovation ensures that the MO remains an excellent choice for memorable stays in Singapore. You'll be a fan in no time.

BEST FOR

Laidback luxury, flawless service, and creative design curation

DON'T MISS

Free-flowing bubbles at HAUS 65 during the evening happy hour

---

PRICE
Rates for a Club Marina Bay Room start from SGD1,000

CONTACT
5 Raffles Avenue, Singapore
039797; +65 6338 0066;
mandarinoriental.com/singapore

IMAGES SUPPLIED

WORDS
HANNAH BRANDLER

The Diamond Amsterdam

This recently-opened boutique hotel in the city centre nods to Amsterdam's jewelled history

What's it like?

You won't miss this building on the corner of the lively Leidseplein square, its gleaming glass façade a futuristic departure from the area's historical buildings. Paying tribute to the city's diamond heritage, the building designed by Roberto Meyer is inspired by the composition of carbon atoms in a crystal structure.

The boutique hotel opened in November 2024 and is set above the bustling Heineken Hoek Grand Café – a venue with an inviting terrace where customers can lounge with pints of the namesake beer, while overlooking the tram lines and pedestrian pathways. All the main attractions and dreamy canals are within walking distance, while trams (or bikes) take you further afield.

A discreet entrance is home to a chic reception, where friendly staff check you in. Interiors are far warmer than the exterior, with amber and copper hues, and soft furnishings. On the guest floors, a mirrored ceiling duplicates the chequered carpet and wallpaper depicting Amsterdam's iconic canal houses – much like reflections in the city's waterways.

GOOD-TO-KNOW

The set breakfast is very generous, complete with granola and yoghurt, toast, fresh fruit, a croissant, and pastel de nata – plus a hot dish (such as avo and eggs on toast).

Rooms

The 36 rooms are small, but cosy and well-configured. All have an earthy and organic look, with an orange-hued colour palette, patterned tiling and high-end finishes. There are some design variations depending on the category (Botanique, Circle, and Rattan). My Circle room had wispy patterned ceilings and a cushioned semi-circle headboard attached to a very comfortable king-size bed.

Rooms also include a desk with EU plug sockets, a Marshall radio, open wardrobe, full-length mirror, safe, complimentary minibar (with non-alcoholic drinks and snacks such as Tony's Chocolonely), coffee machine, kettle, plus slippers and robes. Guests are also gifted a reusable water bottle and a Stroopwafel.

The bathroom sink area is part of the bedroom, though frosted glass separates a toilet cubicle and shower.

There are, however, a few issues. The mirror above my desk wasn't fixed in place at the bottom, so banged against the wall every time a door shut in the corridor. The desk was also a little unsteady and the wifi connection was patchy – my Zoom video froze frequently.

Facilities

The street-level Heineken Hoek Grand Café is a laidback venue attracting guests and passers-by alike. An all-day menu is packed with tasty snacks and Dutch staples such as bitterballen, plus burgers, sandwiches and salads. Upstairs is a steakhouse, with live music on weekends. **BT**

VERDICT

A beautiful boutique offering with cosy rooms and a buzzy square on your doorstep. The hotel can further impress with better wifi.

BEST FOR

Chic design in the heart of Amsterdam

DON'T MISS

A Heineken on the terrace, whatever the time of day

PRICE

From €191 for an entry-level room, not including 12.5% city tax

CONTACT

Kleine-Gartmanplantsoen 1-3,
1017 RP Amsterdam; +31 (0)20 2250121;
thediamond.amsterdam

IMAGES SUPPLIED

WORDS
YI-HWA HANNA

Carbone Riyadh

A Greenwich village icon is reimagined to bring New York swagger to the kingdom

What's it like?
Set within the stylish grounds of Mansard Riyadh – A Radisson Collection Hotel found in Riyadh's Al Murabba district – Carbone brings the white-tablecloth theatrics of a New York Italian-American classic to the kingdom. The original US location, found in NYC's Greenwich Village, reinvented the old-school 1950s Italian resturant. The nostalgic, *Goodfellas*-worthy flair, notoriously difficult-to-snag reservations, and see-and-be-seen vibe has attracted a wide range of A-list celebrities since it opened in 2013, and since then, it has opened in Miami, Dallas, and Las Vegas, as well as Hong Kong, Doha, and Riyadh. Most recently, it opened in London this September, and in Dubai this October. The Riyadh location has been open since November 2023. In the kingdom, the restaurant's dimly-lit interiors, luxe entry, and piano-bar mezzanine lend cinematic glamour before you even open the menu. Inside, deep blue walls, gold-framed mirrors and parquet flooring set a sleek scene.

Food and drink
The menu pays tribute to classic Italian-American favourites with flourish. The tableside Caesar Alla ZZ salad – one of Carbone's signature dishes – offers dramatic flair, wonderfully fresh greens, and enormous croutons that are just the right balance of soft and crunchy, enrobed with a perfectly creamy sauce that never overwhelms. The famed Spicy Rigatoni – a dish that helped put the original restaurant on the dining map – delivers al-dente rigatoni in a rich, creamy sauce that feels incredibly moreish. While the Riyadh restaurant does serve an edited version of the original sauce to ensure it's zero-proof, it's no less impressive. The rest of the menu dances out in hearty, difficult-to-resist combinations each good enough to make you want to ignore the calorie counts that taunt you throughout the menu: the perfectly-cooked duck fat-laden roasted Potatoes Louie; the buttery and garlicky Jumbo Shrimp Scampi; the juicy Mario's Meatballs; and a whole Branzino that is a quiet star with its tender, flakey meat and delicately crisp skin, served with just the right amount of Italian flag sauce. Your struggle here will be in making sure you leave room for dessert, with ten options including a sculptural carrot cake, Nutella tiramisu, crumbly tarts, and a silky lemon cheesecake to choose from. Wash it all down with expertly-crafted mocktails that go well beyond the standard.

Service
The service here moves with precision: staff anticipate orders and read the room with ease, with a level of finesse that stands out even in Riyadh's growing dining scene. Like the food, the irresistibly warm service seems to follow a go big or go home philosophy. **BT**

GOOD-TO-KNOW

The vibe at Carbone Riyadh is considerably more quiet than its New York or Dubai counterparts, but it does liven up as the night goes on, and understandably is more animated on weekends than weekdays.

VERDICT

If you've ever wanted to feel like Tony Soprano, or any movie-worthy fedora-wearing Italian red sauce joint boss, this is your chance. If you choose the right dishes, a night here can live up to the hype (and the price tag). Go for the buzz, stay for the theatrics, and return for the spicy rigatoni.

HOURS

Open daily from 7pm to 1am.

CONTACT

carboneksa.com

DRESS CODE

Smart chic.

HOT TIPS

As expected with a restaurant known for its star-studded list of celebrity clientele and reputation for glamorous, golden-era decadence, it is quite expensive for a place serving such homey classics – but it's the quality and vibe that make it worth it, particularly if you're celebrating an occasion.

IMAGES **SUPPLIED**

IMAGES **SUPPLIED**

The story of a kingdom

AMONG THE ANCIENT TOMBS, starlit nights, and jaw-dropping rock formations that spread across Saudi Arabia's AlUla, there is a rich history to be discovered — and there is no better, or more immersive, way to learn about it than at the Ancient Kingdoms Festival. The event includes theatrical performances, cultural storytelling, drone shows, geology hikes, intimate tours of the area's archaeological wonders, and offers rare glimpses of artefacts that shaped the region,and more, and two of its most celebrated experiences — The Incense Road Experience (a multisensory exploration set in the old town) and Hegra After Dark (a drone show featuring stories from the sky) — won a prestigious award at the inaugural Saudi Event Awards, held earlier this year. Both will return as part of this year's Ancient Kingdoms Festival, which will be held from until 6 December in AlUla. To learn more — or to book tickets — you can visit experiencealula.com. **BT**

DISCOVER KIMPTON KAFD RIYADH, WHERE LUXURY FEELS PERSONAL.

Kimpton KAFD Riyadh brings a fresh take on hospitality to KAFD (King Abdullah Financial District). With 212 rooms and suites, the hotel combines modern elegance with an easy, welcoming charm. Discover global flavors at Botanica, vibrant plates at Ziya, crafted moments at Vinyl Ember, and poolside relaxation at Kanza. Every detail feels personal, with luxury made to connect and inspire.

For bookings, call: +966 11 440 9999 | Email: Reservations.KimptonKafd@ihg.com
Kimpton KAFD Riyadh, Parcel 4.05, Street Boulevard, Al-Ebtekar 2, 2921 Al-Aqiq, 13519 Riyadh

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